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Staying independent in the global age

TURNING 46 does not seem somehow as significant as reaching 50, or even 25, let alone the momentous century. Nevertheless, as Malaysia celebrates Merdeka today, we arrive at a juncture marking the last time this historic event is commemorated under the outstanding premiership of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

As we salute that day 46 years ago when we became free from British colonial rule, we should remember that while the struggle for independence may have ended, the struggle to remain independent is never-ending. No one has been more aware of this than Dr Mahathir himself. Two years ago he declared, "One of the central truths of our times is that the Second Age of Colonialism is already upon us".

In this new age of imperialism, war, gunboat diplomacy and unequal treaties to coerce trade have been replaced by pressure to liberalise economies and human rights and open up markets. Expeditions to establish colonies have been replaced by invasions to implement regime change. The rhetoric of empire has been replaced by the language of globalisation.

While Malaysia has benefited from international trade and foreign direct investment, the 1997 financial crisis demonstrated how vulnerable we were to international currency speculation, manipulation by rogue traders and volatile flows of short-term capital. While the worst seems to be over, it shows how painful the impact of globalisation can be.

In rejecting externally imposed policies and instituting our own solutions, Malaysia not only revived the economy but also prevented the loss of economic and political independence. As Dr Mahathir has said, "450 years of colonialism is enough. Malaysia must be free. We must decide our future for ourselves".

This is the continuing agenda not only for Malaysia but also for other former colonies. We need to work together with the other developing countries to shape alternative approaches to globalisation so that we can remain free. Many of the new nations carved from the old empires have collapsed. Malaysia has been spared military coups, dictatorships and civil wars, and has survived the communist insurgency and the 1969 race riots. Over the past year, we have weathered the ravages of SARS, the fallout from the invasion of Iraq, the uncertainties of the world economy, and the menace from international terrorism.

We have indeed come a long way since 1957. But there is much unfinished business. We need to make our toilets and water cleaner, our streets tidier and safer, our schools smarter, more disciplined and productive, our civil servants faster, friendlier and less prone to corruption, our businessmen more productive, enterprising and innovative, our corporations more accountable and transparent, our workers more knowledgeable and skilful, and our citizens more civic-conscious.

Above all, middle Malaysians who have gained so lavishly from national self-determination must come out in force to fight obscurantism and extremism. Although we can neither insulate ourselves from the perils of globalisation nor prepare ourselves for unexpected shocks, the goodwill that has held us together despite racial, religious and cultural differences, and the imaginative political and economic policies that have been developed to make the country peaceful and prosperous, suggest that we can look forward to where we are going in the years to come with confidence and optimism.

