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The right stuff

A MALAYSIAN in space? It would have been dismissed as wishful thinking even a few years ago, when space exploration and research were still monopolised by the economically wealthy and the militarily mighty. But the ending of the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union has opened the field to all comers. Malaysia Boleh is about to be lifted to celestial heights with the selection of the country's first astronaut, set to begin in two months. The net is being cast wide - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the first Malaysian in space need not necessarily be a pilot or have a military background.

Any Malaysian can be chosen, but those who hope to qualify can only be a handful, since an astronaut has to satisfy rigorous physical, psychological and technical requirements. Moreover, even after being selected, the person has to undergo an extended period of training before going off into space. Although manned spaceflight has been greatly facilitated by advances in technology, there are still risks involved, especially during the exit from and return to earth. But it will certainly be worthwhile because the first Malaysian spaceman will be an inspiration to the nation and boost interest in space technology.

Malaysia has already entered the space age with the launch of the first micro-satellite, TiungSAT-1. The more advanced satellite RazakSAT, to be launched next year, will take us one more rung up the space ladder. If all goes well, Malaysians will wake up to greetings of selamat pagi from our own astronaut somewhere out in space in 2005.