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What a grand birthday! (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Sun. - Malaysia celebrated its 46th Merdeka Day today with its biggest parade yet, set against the magnificent backdrop of the new Palace of Justice and witnessed by a crowd of more than 300,000 people.

People from all walks of life converged on the Boulevard in the Federal administrative capital as early as 4am, joined later by the nation's leaders.

The overcast morning sky gave way to pleasant weather, just in time for the performances and march-past of thousands of participants dressed in colourful outfits and costumes.

The three-hour parade, themed Keranamu Malaysia (For You, Malaysia), began with the arrival of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah in a horse-drawn carriage.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, celebrating Merdeka for the last time in his capacity as the premier, and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali arrived a little earlier, in a Naza Ria V6 multi-purpose vehicle.

As the Negaraku with the new tempo was sung, four Royal Malaysian Air Force helicopters flew overhead, trailing the Jalur Gemilang and the armed forces flags behind them. Plumes of red and yellow smoke billowed, creating a spiral of colours signifying the national flag.

In perfect timing, a fighter jet roared past, before the King inspected a guard of honour.

This was followed by the flag-raising ceremony accompanied by the Negaraku, Jalur Gemilang and Keranamu Malaysia songs, performed by the Malaysian Teachers Training Colleges' choir accompanied by the police brass band.

Fourteen cannon shots boomed as RMAF and police helicopters flew past carrying the States' flags.

In true testimony to the nation's ethnic unity, spectators and performers alike, led by seven students of different races, rendered the ikrar followed by seven hearty shouts of Merdeka.

A recording of Dr Mahathir's emotionally-charged rendition of his poem Perjuangan Yang Belum Selesai drew a moment of silence from the crowd as they listened attentively to the meaningful words.

The celebration then shifted to high gear with the performance of the rhythms and sounds of Malaysia by Kumpulan Simfoni Rakyat Malaysia comprising 6,000 drummers, musicians, dancers and choir members.

Positioned in front of the royal dais, dressed in colourful national costumes, they were a sight to behold, dancing to the catchy beats of the rebana ubi, kertuk aum and kelapa, Chinese drums, tavil and tablas, Thai drums, kompang, jidor and ketebung, played simultaneously by 2,500 drummers of different races.

The crowd lining the sides of the Boulevard craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the 19 eye-catching floats and march-past by 23,000 participants from government agencies, private corporations, schools and institutions that had contributed to the nation's independence, peace and security.

The parade also included a sector comprising Malaysians who have gained international fame during Dr Mahathir's tenure as Prime Minister from 1981.

Waving to the cheering crowd, English Channel swimmer Datuk Abdul Malik

Mydin, solo round-the-world sailor Datuk Azhar Mansor and Mount Everest conquerors M. Magendran and N. Mohandas were ferried in Bufori and TD2000 cars.

Historical footage of the 1957 Merdeka celebration was shown on a big screen.

There were magnificent performances of cultural dances by a 9,000-strong contingent, and finally the much-awaited heart-stopping air show by RMAF fighter jets and light aircraft.

Joining in the celebration were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and wife Datuk Seri Endon Mahmood, Cabinet ministers, foreign dignitaries and about 300 foreign journalists invited to cover the parade.

Tourists, from as far as Austria, Sweden, the United States and China, were awed not only by the magnificence of Putrajaya, but also the unity among the people as reflected in today's celebration.

Americans Kathleen Morrissey, 35, and Kari Stillson, 31, both here for the first time, described the celebration as "so colourful".