

Malaysians of the post-Merdeka generation
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FOR most of my life, I ignorantly believed that most of the significant events in human civilisation had already taken place — I didn't expect anything particularly important to happen in my lifetime. After all, man had already gone to the moon by the time I was born. Two world wars had been fought, electricity and the sewage system were available where I lived, and the automobile and airplane were already invented.

Domestically, we were an independent nation, and the national nightmare that was May 13, 1969 had passed. Indonesia had dropped Konfrontasi and was now our friend. As I grew older, I wasn't expecting to tell the younger generation stories about brutal occupations, about gathering at the Padang, or about hiding from other Malaysians who were after my blood. I never walked more than a couple of kilometres to school, and I never had to lose anyone to a war.

At most, I thought, I would be telling my grandchildren horrific stories about what it was like driving home during the festive season before the North-South Expressway was built. Or how big and ugly mobile phones used to be.

Subsequent events, of course, proved that I couldn't have been more wrong. Globally, since Sept 11, the divide between Muslims and the West looms large over any discussion of global affairs, as does the quagmire the US faces in Iraq.

In the past decade, new economic superpowers have begun to emerge, and this could alter the balance of power once more, paving the way for a future that could either be significantly different or more of the same, albeit with different characters. So new challenges are being thrust upon my generation. The threat of global warming and the high price of oil are, hopefully, seeding a new revolution — a green one. The Internet has triggered changes in the developed world. How we use the immense power it offers will surely have repercussions. Those are only the obvious examples, but I think they offer ample evidence that history will indeed remember this time.

Closer to home, these are also interesting times. I am now months away from turning 30. Born at the end of the 1970s, I've spent most of my life in the Klang Valley, save for a brief sojourn to the US as a student. So this country is, undoubtedly, home for me. I am Chinese in ethnicity, English in language, and middle in class, so I am far from a representative of the majority of the population. But I am, inevitably, a product of my environment, and that environment is Malaysia.

I've seen the city around me transform. In some ways for the better, in others for the worse. The skyline has changed dramatically, as have the people who walk the streets below it. Nationally, our culture has become more liberal and progressive in some ways, but more conservative and intolerant in others. I can't help but feel sad at the decline in our sense of justice — increasingly, those who do wrong seem to go unpunished while those who do right are unrewarded.

I also see the limitations of racial politics being reached, and boundaries of decency and reason being crossed. None of these changes happened overnight. Which means turning back the tide will take time as well. Regardless, it does place us at a crucial moment in our

history. And there I was, thinking nothing significant was going to happen in my lifetime.

I am part of the post-Merdeka generation, a demographic that is inevitably increasing in numbers. Considering it is we who will inherit this country, it is up to us to shape its future. At the risk of sounding disrespectful, I find little hope in the generations of the past. Too many of you have already made up your minds, and your world-view isn't going to be easy to change. Your perception of the issues of the day, for better or worse, is coloured by the events of the past, whether the Emergency, Merdeka, the formation of Malaysia and the separation of Singapore, or May 13.

The emerging generation, however, is free from such baggage. Many of us, myself included, have benefited greatly from this nation; its stability, economic progress and abundance of opportunity. A lot of it is the result of the work and sacrifice of the previous generation, but I think our gratitude is misplaced if we think we have to inherit their ideas and fears as well.

The optimist in me thinks the modern Malaysian knows what needs to be done to steer this country forward.

We can start by rejecting the recycled rhetoric so frequently employed by leaders with nothing new to offer. We can choose to tear down the lines and divisions that have survived way past their sell-by dates. And we can stop offering ourselves excuses not to create change. We might only be a minority for now, but we young Malaysians need to start somewhere. Only then will we see something truly significant in our lifetime.

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