

Can Malaysia look to a better future in 2007?

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KUALA LUMPUR has been the venue for many different summits and meetings. Whether it's OIC or Apec, Asean or Nam, however, to most residents of the city, they all mean the same thing — road closures and police outriders telling us to pull over so someone whose time is worth more can pass by. Then, in a few days, life in the city goes back to normal. Like none of it ever happened.

It's important, I suppose, that when the dignitaries see our city, they see it roll by quickly and not stare at the same building while stuck in traffic. To them, it would be like KL's infamous traffic congestion is a myth, like allegations of its people being unfriendly. How unfriendly can KL-ites be, after all, when they make way for visitors to pass?

Perhaps, to some, this is an easy way of coming to terms with the traffic congestion. I'm sure the same kind of "solution" is employed in other cities too, so it's a practice that's hardly unique to us. But after all the visitors have come and gone, most city dwellers would find that nothing has changed for them.

With 2007 just around the corner,



we're in the midst of preparing for two special occasions. First, it's the 50th year of independence for Malaysia. Second, it's also Visit Malaysia Year.

In preparation, we're starting to look at a rather pedestrian issue as something requiring urgent attention. Taxis in Kuala Lumpur are notorious for selectively picking up passengers, and depending on the driver, not using the legally required meters. It's a problem any city commuter knows too well, but ultimately feels powerless to change.

I mean, I was once threatened with physical harm by a cab driver because I slammed his car door in frustration at his refusal to use the meter. I simply boarded the taxi of an honest driver instead.

Whatever action is taken by the enforcement agencies will no doubt be

welcome, but if the aim is to solve the problem only for a year, then it's rather pointless. Surely, we're not implying that it's fine for locals to deal with unscrupulous cab drivers, and that only tourists deserve better and even then, only for Visit Malaysia Year.

I suspect that that's exactly the implication, but I will do my best to stay away from such speculation. But I remember back to about eight years ago when we were getting ready for another big event. In 1998, Kuala Lumpur was getting ready to be the first Asian city to host the Commonwealth Games. It was certainly a proud moment, so only a monument as big as the 100,000-capacity stadium in Bukit Jalil could suffice.

Now, if stadiums were disposable, we could've just built it for the event and then be rid of it after the closing ceremony. Unfortunately, the stadium remains as a reminder of how Malaysia won its best-ever haul of 10 gold medals, finishing fourth behind such sporting powerhouses as Australia, Canada and England.

The 1998 Commonwealth Games could have marked the beginning of a

new era in Malaysian sports, but instead it appears to be an anomaly or an aberration. Since then, we're running out of ideas on how to rescue our athletes from the clutches of mediocrity — so much so that even a proposal to spend millions to build a training facility in London seemed a sensible suggestion. The Bukit Jalil stadium might still be standing tall, but our standard of sports isn't quite on par. So nearly 10 years after the Commonwealth Games, we're no better off than we were before.

In that same way, the 50th anniversary of the independence of Malaya should be used as a turning point for our country. Now, dates and anniversaries are little more than symbolic, so it would be naive to expect things to be different in 2007 just because 50 is a nice round number as opposed to 49. But at the same time, it's as good a time as any to pause and reflect.

Whatever ails our society today, be it ethnic and religious polarisation, uneven economic development, or corruption, it's worth noting that they aren't problems that emerged in the past few years. They are inevitably the result of policies and decisions

made in the past few decades.

If we don't acknowledge that our present is largely made up of the sum of our past actions, and we don't acknowledge the fact that whatever changes we would like to see in our society will also demand the same kind of time and energy investment, then we can only make do with temporary moments of glory, like the 1998 Commonwealth Games, or the wonderfully free-flowing traffic enjoyed by visiting delegates.

So in 2007, we can look forward to a parade of voices telling us how wonderful and peachy Malaysia is as we celebrate 50 years, even though evidence demands that we take responsibility and act quickly to stop the tide of polarisation and intolerance from shaping our next 50 years.

Also, in 2007, we can enjoy cleaner streets and public toilets, friendly and law-abiding taxis, and the view from the Eye On Malaysia, because it's Visit Malaysia Year. Who knows, maybe we could even change the weather and also stop the haze from making its annual visit, just for one year.

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