

We can be proud of... democracy

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CONVENTIONAL wisdom would suggest that turning 50 is a milestone, a once-in-a-lifetime event and something that should be celebrated and feted as much as life itself.

The nation's 50th birthday is soon here, and this year's celebrations shall be the best ever, thus far. We don't turn 50 every day.

Nevertheless, many who exercise in political punditry, that's all of us by the way, are suggesting that all the flag-waving, parades and fireworks come Aug 31 are part of an elaborate strategy on the part of the incumbent government taking us on a feel-good ride all the way to a general election, soon. Perhaps.

But are not 49 or 51 years of Merdeka big deals, too? They, too, are once-in-a-lifetime phenomena, and should be causes for celebration. I may be wrong, but next year's celebration would presumably be less festive than this year's.

Is the nation turning 51 less of a big deal than 50? Of course not. In fact, in many ways, it is a bigger deal since we as a nation will be a year older; we have been together a year longer; and, probably achieved more as a nation than a year before.

Thus, the intensity of our celebra-

tions may just be numerically induced, the better looking the number, the more festive it gets. Can you imagine what it would be like at 100?

Having said that though, 50 years of nationhood is not a bad achievement. A nation that is 50 years old, having achieved what we have, is something to shout about.

It's a nation that began as an experiment in the idea of nationhood by bringing together, under one flag, disparate groups of people with different ideas of what independence meant, subscribing to different ideologies and political leanings. Add to the mix differences in ethnicity, religion, cultural experience, economic standing and class.

While there may not have been bookies taking wagers in faraway London and here in Malaya then, many felt it was an experiment doomed to failure. History would have shown later that nations of more "ideal" ingredients — homogeneity in ethnicity or religion — failed when faced with tensions of a different kind, such as economic disparities.

But the Federation of Malaya, and later Malaysia, survived. They were, of course, tensions and troubles in the past five decades. I am not sure

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whether it was pragmatism, idealism, or desperation that kept us together, and the ugliness within all of us in check. But we are still around.

We have black spots in our history, too — which nation is blemish-free? The most famous and often quoted was May 13, 1969. No one wants to be reminded of the ugliness but it was often brought up as a cautionary tale or the bogeyman to keep us in check.

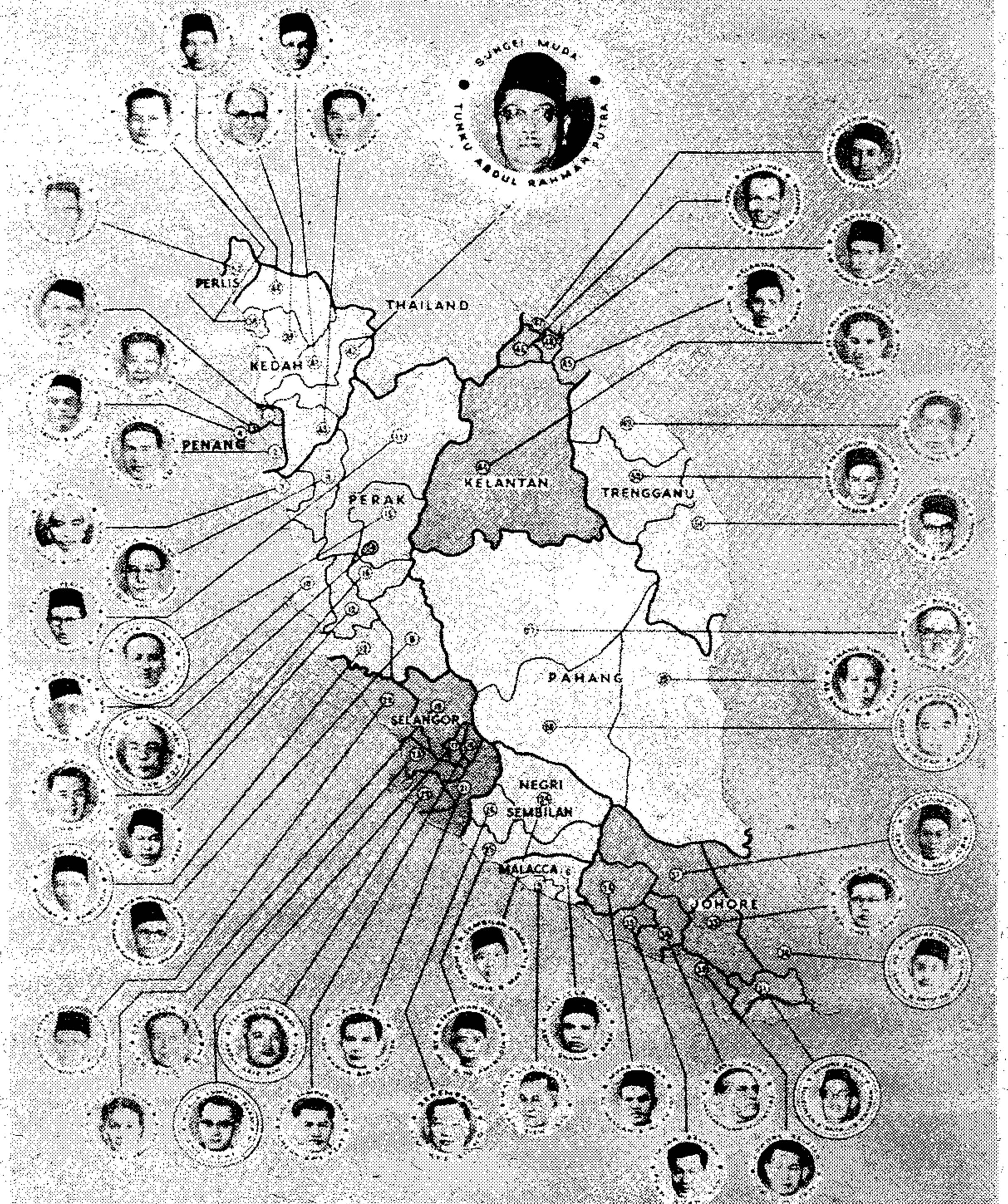
Of late, I have been trying to identify the most telling achievement of the country and its citizens over the past 50 years as I see more and more flags in the streets. Achievements beyond the obvious physical development, rising income, better health care, higher literacy, international standing, globalised citizenry, etc.

It must be, I believe, our parliamentary democracy, and the ready acceptance of all of us that the concept of one vote for each citizen is the only way for us.

Much maligned, perhaps by the antics of a few members of parliament, by a cynicism-abound populace, our democracy, in my opinion, is perhaps the best showing we have in five decades. It is something that no one can take from us.

Even as many would claim the imperfections of our election process — allegations of vote rigging, phantom voting and dubious electoral rolls —

CHOSEN BY THE PEOPLE THE 52 SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES IN THE 1955 FEDERAL ELECTIONS



Poster with the winning candidates in the first federal election in 1955. In this election, the Alliance led by Tunku Abdul Rahman secured a thumping victory by winning 51 out of the 52 seats, with the sole seat won by the Parti Islam Se-Malaya (Pas).

at every turn, every citizen in this country, except for a few, believes in the ballot box as his or her right for a say in nation-building.

Save for a few whackos and nut cases, we believe in the evolution or revolution through the ballot boxes. None of us believe that we could change things by taking to the streets, a la people power.

Even if we did take to the streets to show our displeasure, we will seek justice and representation at the polls, putting out bet to the person or party that will grieve and fight for us.

Politicians of all stripes, socialist or elitist, religious or secular, idealists or the mongering types from all persuasions also see the democratic process as the only way to power.

When we talk of pushing ideas, ideals and agenda, we go through the ballot box. When we talk of revolution, justice and retribution, revenge and getting even, we wait for the polls. No military coup or people-movement blocking the gates of par-

liament for us. No secretly concocting Molotov cocktails in the backroom.

We vote, and soon with indelible ink, and we live with the outcome. Thus far, that has been the case. There are countries that are much older than our 50 years — that have failed this democratic test.

I believe every time we go to the polls, we are reaffirming our nation's independence from the rule of the mob. To me, that is bigger than the number 50, or 51 or 75.

If 50 years from now, future generations could still count on the democratic process to be their guiding principle, no matter how imperfect it may be, then we would have arrived among nations

I would celebrate Aug 31 every year knowing that each of us has accepted the democratic process and no one, as far as I know, wants it to end. So there you have it, our nation of 50 is not defined by its age, but by how long it has kept to its democratic ideals.