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# Rich tradition of Malay royalty

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**RULING ICONS:** The enthronements of the sultans of Johor and Perak reveal the centuries-old link with our regal rulers



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**M**ALAYSIAN royalty in recent months have given Malaysians new grounds of hope and strength to face challenges both internally and externally. The people are now willing to put their faith and confidence in the timeless institution of the sultans and the rajas.

Malaysians may have entertained some misgivings from time to time about royalty and its future in the country. But, whatever has been said and done in the name of royalty, one thing is clear: Royalty, whichever way you look at it, will be part of the so-called *darah-dag-*

*ing* of the Malays, forming the majority of the population in Malaysia today.

Malay royalty has had a rich and eventful ancestry that dates back to the days of the Malacca sultanate and even earlier. Against this colourful and centuries-old background, the two recent enthronements of the Sultan of Johor and the Sultan of Perak have fired the imagination of historians, royalty enthusiasts and the people, especially the Malays, in the present challenging times in the country.

A new beginning is very much anticipated for royalty and the country in the coming years. Strong points in favour of the current crop of royalty include their youthfulness, uprightness and closer rapport with the people.

Following the rise and fall of the Malacca sultanate in the 15th century and the consequent advent of the institution of Malay royalty in the nine states of the Malay peninsula then, the respective sultans and rajas, as they were known and still blessed with the same titles today, have always been recognised as a distinct symbol of history, culture and tradition of the Malays in the peninsula.

Why is history so significant to the Malays? This is so at least for the peninsula Malays. History has been the crucial link to a long existence as an ethnic race in the so-called Malay Archipelago.

In narrative historical terms, its centre is situated in that part of

Minangkabau, Sumatra, today located in the area of Bukit Siguntang where it was related that Sang Sepurba held court.

From this august beginning, the scions of the Royal House of Bukit Siguntang spread their control through the Malay Archipelago to Malacca, Johor-Riau and Kampar and to the rest of the Malay kingdoms dotted along the Straits of Malacca and to other parts of the Malay Peninsula.

Indeed, much had happened to provide the royalty in Malaysia and the Malays in the country with their historical legitimacy. This was needed in the face of intrusions from the West and the East throughout the colonial centuries in the past till today.

Fragmentation and divisions resulted through the "divide and rule" policies of the colonial administration throughout very much of the 20th century. Finally, ethnic unity of the Malay race took a nationalistic turn with the declining Empire days and the founding of independent nations after the Pacific War.

Besides the historical legitimacy earned through conflicts and co-operation throughout the region, culture also played its part in the homogenisation process of the ethnic Malays. Despite leaving their birthplaces and travelling abroad across the straits to begin a new life and existence in a strange land, they were made to feel at home very quickly. What mattered was



**Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah and Raja Permaisuri Perak Tuanku Zara Salim.** Sultan Nazrin's enthronement is a showcase of the rich traditions behind the Malay rulers' legacy in the peninsula, which date back to the Malacca sultanate.

that they never left home without the essentials of their culture.

These merged with the local varieties until a new version of things were found and adopted. Soon the cultural practices of gotong-royong, *adat-beradat* and *santai-bersantai* came to be accepted and internalised by the local inhabitants.

Over time these became part of the accepted culture of the *perantau* in his *perantauan*. Malay royalty had also benefited greatly from the new universalism experienced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This mixture of old and new and the fusion of local and foreign elements helped to maintain a continuity with the past with its religious and cultural influences from India, the Middle Eastern countries and Europe even till today. With a message addressed to

the country's younger generations, Malay royalty will serve to inspire them with its narrative legitimacy of history, its continuity of culture and finally its impetus for traditions, to survive the test of time. These can all be seen in the recent enthronement of the Perak ruler as the 35th sultan of the state.

Steeped in traditions built upon the practices of centuries before that, the rolling out of the various events making up the whole enthronement ritual, the institution of Malay royalty succeeded in bringing about order, prosperity and harmony to the realm and the people in the past, present and the future.

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