

When we finally become Malaysians
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Fifty years ago today, we became Malaysia when four Southeast Asian territories - the Federation of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore - got together to form the Federation of Malaysia despite objections from neighbours Indonesia and the Philippines.

Today, some 29 million people proudly call themselves Malaysians and enjoy a fair bit of peace and prosperity, although Singapore left 48 years ago and appears to have a better standard of living.

But the road to today has not been easy in a country blessed with a good climate, mineral-rich and verdant soil, and the lack of natural disasters. There were communist terrorists, racial tensions and economic downturns that blighted an otherwise happy country.

We can lament the past, sigh and shake our heads at all the mistakes and missed chances, face-palm the moments that were senseless and rue what could have been.

Or really, move on.

And spend all our days now being Malaysians, with fellow Malaysians from every nook and corner of the two parts of the country separated by the South China Sea.

In the last two weeks and a day, The Malaysian Insider sought to highlight this Malaysia of people from all walks and station in life – their lives and thoughts – forming our collective narrative and future.

On their own, neighbourhoods and groups have also worked on Malaysia at 50 – from stories to artworks to forums and more. Each of us trying to explore what happened, what is happening and what could happen.

We have all come up with many ideas and things that shape Malaysia and us, as Malaysians.

A scene from the Malaysia Day celebration in Kuching today. - September 16, 2013. A scene from the Malaysia Day celebration in Kuching today. - September 16, 2013. The fact that the government of the day, which was the government of that day in 1963, is celebrating it in a low-key manner is actually more gratifying than it is sad.

Because we have matured enough to celebrate it on our own. Without seeking any handouts, or dictated by logos and slogans or listening to boring speeches about what unity is and what being a Malaysian is.

We define our Malaysianess. We define it in the various ways and cultures that are more than the sum total of what Malaysia is made up of.

Yes, we can continue to be and lament that we are Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others in the boxes and silos that define us in official documents.

Or we can take the opportunity to celebrate that every child, no matter what race, is a Malaysian when they get a chance to study in a local university or work in the government or in the private sector.

See, the political and community leaders of 1960s Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and, for a brief moment, Singapore, brought four territories together as one country – in the hope we can face the world as one nation, bigger and stronger than the parts that made it up.

But the country seems to have forgotten that. And its leaders still think of us in silos that need help separately to reach 2020. That is the same kind of thinking that led to Malaysia in 1963.

This then has become our opportunity to be greater and still remain faithful to the original idea of Malaysia, as Tunku Abdul Rahman succinctly put it, "We do so because we know that we have come together through our own free will and desire in the true spirit of brotherhood and love of freedom."

He went on to say, "As it was with Malaya, so it can be with Malaysia. With trust in Almighty God, unity of purpose and faith in ourselves, we can make Malaysia a land of prosperity and peace.

"In doing so let every Malaysian It is the people who define our Malaysianess, including those from Sarawak seen here watching the grandest ever Malaysia Day celebration, held in Kuching today. - September 16, 2013. It is the people who define our Malaysianess, including those from Sarawak seen here watching the grandest ever Malaysia Day celebration, held in Kuching today. - September 16, 2013. in all the States of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah ensure that our Malaysia is truly worthy of the aims and hopes we have shared, the trials and stress, we have endured, in working together to achieve our common destiny."

A common destiny as Malaysians, not just Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others.

And only now, we celebrate Hari Malaysia. Today in Kuching, the King and Queen together with the Cabinet will rejoice in the day. Last week in Kota Kinabalu, Bank Negara launched a 50th anniversary coin. Elsewhere, we celebrate the day ourselves.

As a country and as a people, we have come a long way and we have a long way to go. Nothing encapsulates that more than Pete Teo's Hari Malaysia that debuts today on YouTube, that the road is long but it can be walked together.

It shows what has to be done for the next 50 years and beyond as we did in the past 50 years. We have to think and be Malaysians. And we have do it hand in hand, together, as Malaysians.

Selamat Hari Malaysia. - September 16, 2013.

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