

Paving the nation's way to ICT

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Dr Mahathir's visionary instinct was clearly demonstrated when he decided that ICT was an important key to global advancement for Malaysia, writes NICK LEONG.

WHEN future generations of Malaysians look back on the many contributions of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, perhaps the one that they would be most thankful for is the way he paved the way for the development of information and communication technology (ICT) in the country.

Dr Mahathir realised from the onset the importance of ICT in the future well-being of the country.

"It is the window to the world," he once told a group of students during a visit to a school in Pasir Mas, Kelantan, in 1997.

But how do you transform a developing country still dependent on agriculture and manufacturing into a modern knowledge-based information savvy nation?

When information technology, and later information and communication technology burst onto the world scene in the early 1990s, many Malaysians were trying to grapple with what exactly the buzz

was all about.

According to Technology Park Malaysia (TPM) chief executive officer Datuk Dr Mohamad Salleh Ismail, the transformation had to start with a will and "Dr Mahathir embodies the will."

"He pushed every one of us, whether we were ready or not," he says.

With the Government leading the way, it was only a matter of time before the whole country embraced the information highway.

Signalling his bold intent to the world, Dr Mahathir initiated and launched the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in August 1995.

Although there would be many more important IT projects launched in the country, such as the world's first microchip passport and the "smart" Mykad, the MSC will always be a symbol of the country's march towards the information age.

Bound by the KL-Seremban Highway, the North-South Expressway, the Shah Alam Expressway, KLCC and the KL International Airport, the MSC is intended to be the "Silicon Valley" of the country, a so-called "test bed" for the latest technologies the world has to offer.

Although only a hub, former Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) executive chairman, the late Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah said it was envisaged that one day the whole country would be covered by the MSC.



Dr Mahathir visiting the MSC HQ last month during the IAP meeting.

"It will be the culmination of the all our efforts to become a truly IT-savvy society," he added.

To encourage investment in the MSC, Dr Mahathir offered pioneer status companies world-class physical and information infrastructure, unrestricted employment of local and foreign knowledge workers, and freedom of ownership.

His heritage to the country is one of modernisation. He is a moderniser. He's achieved for Malaysia the modernisation of the country. With his introduction of Information Communications Technology (ICT) into Malaysia, he has transformed Malaysia into one of the most wired developing nation. Surpassing even that of other developed nations.

He is also the creator of a huge middle class in the country, cutting across racial lines. This contributes to unity and stability as the middle class have common interests. He is also one of the most fearless leaders from the Third World.

- Former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam

To the consternation of moral guardians of the country, Dr Mahathir also promised that there would be no Internet censorship.

"If people want pornographic literature, you can, but at the end of the day, you gain nothing in knowledge," he told Malaysian students in the United Kingdom in 1995.

To complement the MSC, Dr Mahathir launched the country's first intelligent city, Cyberjaya, in May 1997.

The RM3.5bil city was supposed to house MSC industries and showcase what modern technology could do to improve the living standard of the people.

Despite the high-tech whiz and its exclusivity, Dr Mahathir was also eager to ensure the leap into the information age would involve all Malaysians.

Technology, he said, was meant

to bring people closer and not drive them apart.

"Our knowledge-economy master plan will not be drafted by the best and brightest, cloistered behind closed doors. It is not an elitist process but one involving everyone from the teacher to his pupil, to his fisherman father, to the mechanic, to the secretary, janitor and chairman of the board," he said in 1996.

When the 1998 Asian financial crisis hit the country, followed by the political turmoil resulting from Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's sacking, many predicted the demise of the MSC and Dr Mahathir's grand plan of an information society.

They said Dr Mahathir would go back on his words and clamp down on anti-government websites. And for a while, it appeared the doom-sayers were right.

Futurist Alvin Toffler resigned from the MSC International Advisory Panel (IAP) in November that year to protest against the treatment of Anwar.

Japanese strategist Dr Kenichi Ohmae was also reported to have resigned from the panel but he denied it, saying he was "a strong supporter of the MSC."

Business Week wasted no time in blasting the MSC as "Mahathir's high-tech folly."

But five years down the road, critics of the MSC and Cyberjaya had to eat their words.

There are 800 MSC-status companies in the country today although the initial target was only 500.

"If that is not success, then what is success?" he said, when opening a building belonging to telecommunication giant, Ericsson, in July.

Although convincing foreigners about our commitment towards ICT was tough, the biggest obstacle to Dr Mahathir's ambition to turn the country into an information society was perhaps the people themselves. Dr Mohamad Salleh says the "doubters among us" had already cost the country dearly.

He added the reluctance of some Malaysians to use English more widely had resulted in technology companies opting to invest in other countries like India and Singapore.

"English is the language of the Internet. That is why Dr Mahathir wanted English to be taught more widely. How do we aspire to be an IT society if we cannot communicate in English?"

Even now, he says, some people are against the move to use English as the medium for learning Mathematics and Science.

Despite the setbacks, nothing should distract us from the strides the country has made in ICT under Dr Mahathir.

Former US governor James Clarke once said, "A politician thinks of the next election; a statesman of the next generation."

Dr Mahathir is clearly a statesman, par excellence.