

My grandpa, Merdeka and I

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I WAS a Form Five student on Aug 31, 1957, a 17-year-old on the cusp of adulthood, standing and watching as a nation was being born. My father and I had travelled down from Kepala Batas to attend the ceremony at Merdeka Stadium, formally celebrating the birth of our nation.

My grandfather, the man who had suggested the date of our independence to Tunku Abdul Rahman, had given me his invitation to the celebrations. Perhaps he had already detected the embers of nationalism within his grandson and wanted to nurture them.

We had arrived in Kuala Lumpur the day before. My father, as deputy head of Umno Youth, was given the responsibility of leading the movement's guard of honour at the ceremony scheduled to take place on the night of Aug 30, 1957.

Thousands of Malaysians had gathered at the Selangor Club Padang (now known as Merdeka Square) to witness the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the Malaysian flag, what we now call Jalur Gemilang.

There was a great deal of jubilation in the air. My father and his colleagues were resplendent in their velvet *songkoks*, white short-sleeved shirts and white slacks.

They were not alone in standing there with their chests bursting with pride. We were finally about to cast off the yoke of colonialism after more than four centuries.

Cries of *Merdeka!* filled the air. People were greeting each other with *Merdeka!* instead of the usual *salam* or salutation. In fact, for the

duration of that wonderful night, it seemed that our entire vocabulary had been replaced by a single word: *Merdeka!*

As the hour of midnight approached, the cacophony of joy reached a crescendo, only to explode as the clock struck twelve, giving the signal for the Union Jack, the symbol of colonial power, to be lowered.

Just as I thought the noise could grow no louder, it did. The throngs cheered and applauded thunderously, as the Malayan flag was raised for the first time. It was a culmination of years of struggle and those who were fortunate and blessed to have had the opportunity to watch history being made knew what it meant. It is an appreciation that, for me, has continued to grow in the fullness of time.

Forty-seven years on, I now have the privilege and honour of leading our country as Prime Minister, a culmination of four decades in public service. As someone who is, for want of a better description, a professional public servant, I cannot help but be filled with pride when I see how far Malaysia has come in less than half a century.

In many instances, we have surpassed nations that achieved their independence before us. And we have accomplished this by virtue of our own sweat and our own toil.

We have filled our freedom with progress and development.

We have been masters of our own destiny.

Notwithstanding our successes, I believe we must remain vigilant against anything that may cause the delicate fabric of our society to tear. National unity must remain one of key priorities if we are to continue to



FROM THE ALBUM: The Prime Minister sitting on his grandfather's lap, in a picture taken around 1940.

progress.

More than three quarters of our people were born after Independence Day. This means more than three quarters of Malaysians have no recollection of life before Malaysia became a sovereign independent state. More than three quarters of all Malaysians have no recollection of life under colo-

nial rule.

Malaysia still has a long way to go and we are a young country in many ways.

But youth has its advantages.

The energy, creativity and openness of youth are wonderful tools to have in the process of nation-building. I have faith that our young Malaysians possess the drive

and vigour to vault this country to greater heights, as long as they grasp the right set of values and principles.

I have attended many *Merdeka* celebrations since 1957, and in all honesty, I will admit that nothing has surpassed the emotions that were stirred during that incomparable experience 47 years ago.