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Prime Minister

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A new revolution stands before us. It is a revolution of global magnitude, capable of transforming human lives everywhere. This revolution is the third of its kind in human history. It comes in the wake of two great revolutions that have affected global communities and transformed the world -- the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution. This new revolution is rapidly changing our world. It is accelerating the process of globalisation, reshaping our economy, and affecting our work and life at a speed never seen before. The revolution that I speak of is the information revolution. The base of this revolution is Information Technology (IT).

2. Malaysia is going to great lengths and taking great pains to harness the power of IT. Almost everyday we hear about IT and the Malaysian test-bed for IT development, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). We have a National IT Agenda. I am sure that many people are asking why we are so concerned about this new technology. We are concerned because unless the technology is properly managed it may well affect human civilisation adversely. On the other hand the proper use of information will enable us to shape policies, strategies and actions which can benefit us immensely or give us advantage over our competitors.

3. With our future at stake we cannot afford to be a more spectator of the information revolution. We need to be a part of it; we need to lead it even. This is why we are spending so much time and effort to grow a local IT industry that is world class. This is also why, despite the recent currency crisis, the MSC projects will proceed as planned.

4. The world is watching us very closely as we try to become a pioneer in IT development. They stand ready to criticise us if we fail, and to follow us if we succeed. Many of them realise the potential of IT, but they have certain vested interests and established soft and hard infrastructure which limit their ability to fully try out the potentials of IT. In Malaysia, in the MSC they will be able to test all their ideas on the application of IT not only without hindrance but with the support of state of the cost infrastructure and policies of the Government.

5. IT and the information revolution will change the rules of global competition and it will transform the way we govern ourselves.

6. In the past, we had successfully transitioned from an agriculture-based economy to an industrial one. Current global trends require that we switch our economic base again, from an economy reliant on cheap labour to one that is driven by knowledge workers. In this matter we really have no choice, unless of course we accept being left behind, being poorer and as a

consequence being subservient to the will of others. The transformation this time will be more difficult but it will not be beyond our capacity. The important thing is the willingness on our part to acquire the necessary skill through hard work and single minded dedication.

7. Our future economic competitiveness will depend upon our willingness to harness IT and become knowledge workers. Through the use of information and knowledge we can increase not only our productivity, but also the quality of our products and services as well. Computers and multimedia technology can help us perform our current jobs more productively and more effectively. Others can too, but we have demonstrated that when Malaysians decide to acquire skills they can do so more quickly than most others.

8. To develop into an army of knowledge workers, we must start today. The starting point is not just our children, but ourselves. How do we start? By not being afraid of technology, by mastering it, and by applying it in our work. We must adopt new attitudes and be open to changes brought about by technology. We must be willing to learn and relearn. Ultimately, we must be able to use technology as the medium to improve our work and the quality of our life.

9. Our aspirations are great. Malaysia does not want to be a mere assembler of products forever. We want to become the product designers. We want to be a nation that uses its brainpower more than merely physical strength. How do we become such a national? We can become such a nation by daring to believe that we are as good as others and can be better, that we can learn and that we can be as innovative as others. A thing is complex only when we don't understand it. But when we learn to understand them it becomes simple and logical.

10. Anyone can be a knowledge worker. We do not need to be a computer scientist to become one. A taxi driver can become a knowledge worker if he can use information and technology to do his job better. Take another example of the 'kuih' seller. A seller of 'kuih' who add cholesterol-free ingredients that have more nutrition to traditional recipes becomes a knowledge worker because he uses knowledge. This is obvious. But there are other things which he may learn to know which can improve both the quality of his products and the volume of his sales. He may learn about the latest method of preparation, the best ingredients, the presentation, the best price, the best outlets etc. Where before he would be stuck with the traditional way of production and sale, his knowledge would enable him to adapt to the demands of a more sophisticated society. And he will benefit from it.

11. Only when both manufacturing and service sectors are manned by knowledge workers and powered by IT can we expect to sustain the required per capita GDP growth rates that will enable us to attain Vision 2020. Current projection indicate that, through an information and knowledge-based economy, we can increase our GDP levels by fourfold within 20 to 25 years. What this means is that, on average, Malaysians can expect to earn four times their current income in the future. This will allow Malaysians to enjoy a quality of life that is second to none in the world.

12. Both the Seventh Malaysia Plan and the Second Industrial Master Plan have given IT due recognition as an element for great changes, a tool to

support our economic growth and to enhance our quality of life. In the Second Industrial Master Plan, an IT driven service sector is identified as the next engine of growth for Malaysia, second only to the manufacturing sector. The importance of IT as a strategic technology thus cannot be overestimated. IT is not only the key to Malaysia's future global competitiveness, but also the primary means to realise the goals of Vision 2020. Given its importance, it is only natural that IT is now at the forefront of our national socio-economic planning and development. To provide us the direction and the way forward with IT, we have developed the National IT Agenda, or NITA.

13. The NITA provides the framework for a national response to IT and to the information revolution. It calls upon all Malaysians to do his or her part in making sure that Malaysia is ready to enter the Information Age. We can do this by understanding IT, harnessing it, realising its potential, and applying it in the most productive way to benefit our people and our country.

14. The ultimate goal of the NITA is to evolve a civil society in the Malaysian mould, a society that is empowered by knowledge and infused with our own distinctive value-system. The society envisioned here is one that is steeped in our own history, tradition, culture and the development experiences. Such a society is one where individuals are united through a shared heritage, where people internalise information, apply knowledge, and use moral and ethical values in making their decisions and in judging their actions. Such a society is one where the notion of human dignity is upheld, where the fundamental rights of the members of society against starvation and poverty is guaranteed, and where individuals are always mindful of the interest of the community as a whole.

15. It is the knowledge-rich and value-creating society that will boost our national productivity to higher levels and ensure our economic survival. It is also this society that will become mature, liberal, democratic, tolerant, caring and economically just -- the society envisioned by Vision 2020. IT with its ability to enhance the human potential will enable us to formulate a civil society that is noble in the true sense.

16. The Government has adopted IT as the nation's number one priority through the NITA. The NITA focuses on three elements crucial to the evolution of the noble society: people development, info-structure (both hard and soft infrastructure) development, and applications development.

17. Through our focus on people development, NITA will enable people to use and master IT, and allow them to create innovative uses of computer technology to develop indigenous content. The info-structure development programme will focus on providing the basic IT facilities that will give all our people basic access to information. Here, info-structure involves not only the information highway, but also the laws, regulations and practices necessary for the development and application of electronic commerce and government. Through the applications development programme, we will focus on the development of a local IT industry. The three core programmes of NITA will help us develop a multimedia content industry, which will enable the production of applications with multi-cultural content for indigenous use and for export. This is the *raison d'etre* for

the MSC project.

18. What we ultimately want is to move Malaysians from being mere consumers or users of foreign multimedia content and applications towards becoming innovators of such technology, producers of effective local applications and inventors of smart solutions. When we have such expertise we can become a regional hub for multimedia content.

19. The MSC project embodies the three elements of NITA and it is the primary means to realise our regional and global ambitions. The project is a programme to bring together the world's best IT and multimedia companies into Malaysia. These companies can help us create and develop applications that are culturally compatible with the various cultures of Asia. The foreign companies need enticement to come to Malaysia and to help us do this. And so we provide the land, the physical infrastructure, the fiscal incentives, and the soft infrastructure in terms of Cyberlaws including 'The Bill of Guarantees'. We are investing a lot to attract the foreign companies, but we do expect to get to know the technologies and their application in research and the development of multimedia content.

20. Currently our R&D expenditure is small compared to the USA, Japan and Switzerland. Our R&D manpower is also very low, about 400 per million population. Most advanced countries have a ratio exceeding 4000 R&D manpower per million population. The MSC is thus also a programme to intensify our R&D effort with the assistance of some of the best companies in the world. Our researchers and scientists must be prepared to take on this challenge.

21. We have a need to focus on multi-cultural compatible applications because, firstly we want to use Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil, presented within our cultural context, to ensure the success of all our MSC flagships. Second, the marketing potential of multi-cultural compatible application is immense. This is because our culture contains elements of those countries with huge market potential. Third, the people who use our services will gain from the applications as they too can have access to information and knowledge relevant to their needs and way of life. With the MSC, Malaysians will get a better quality of life. Through the MSC, all those who are touched by it, Asians and non-Asians alike, will be able to improve their lives at the social, political, cultural, intellectual, psychological and spiritual levels.

22. The MSC is therefore a huge test-bed for all Malaysians and for our partners to test the creative and innovative products and their applications. It is a place to test our ideas and ideals. We must not fail to take this opportunity provided by the MSC. In addition the creation and development of applications need not be confined within the MSC area alone: it can be extended to location outside the MSC as well. What is needed is creativity, advanced technology, and the facilitating resources such as entrepreneurs, enterprises, institutions, management skills, and the will to make it happen.

23. Apart from the MSC, the nation will require the formulation and implementation of other IT initiatives throughout the country. The NITA calls on us all to fulfil this need. In doing so, we must always bear in mind the two critical issues of equity and universal access. We must make

sure that the poor do not remain poor through the denial of access to either information or technology. We must never lose sight of our commitment to our people in the pursuit of our dreams. We must help all Malaysians create a better life so that we can all move to become an information and knowledge-rich society.

24. Through placing IT at the centre stage of our socio-economic development and planning, we are in fact attempting to adjust to a new age which will be substantially different from that which we are familiar with. Naturally, when we deal with the future we also have to deal with the uncertainties. For example, while we know that technology will drive social change, its full impact on society, culture and equity has yet to be determined. It is entirely possible that our social and cultural norms, social practices and value systems may be eroded away. The choice is ours. We can maintain our cultural and social heritage, indeed even to enhance it or we can drift with whatever changes which may take place, losing our identity and cultural personality in the process.

25. There are many other challenges of the Information Age. For example, increasing globalisation and access to information will cause competing and conflicting demands from different groups within society. It will also result in the misuse and abuse of information. Whether our public policy apparatus is capable of responding effectively to these challenges, is something which we will have to attend to. What we do know is that we can manage and respond to the changes by being fully aware of the uncertainties and by anticipating them. Our move towards electronic government is one way of preparing the public policy apparatus for the future. This move represents only the beginning of many more significant changes to come.

26. Our strength in tackling future challenges lies not only in our experience in initiating and managing change in the past, but also in our willingness to do even more in the future. Once before we took control of our nation's destiny through the NEP, and we succeeded. Within one generation we managed to transform the entire population of Malaysia. Instead of becoming farmers, planters and fishermen like their parents, the children of the NEP grew up to become engineers, lawyers, doctors, academicians and businessmen. Transforming an entire nation is no small achievement. We have done it before. And we can do it again.

27. Malaysia is in a good position to take advantage of IT. We have 25 years of experience in developing a formidable electrical and electronics industry. We have a well-educated and trainable work force and our IT infrastructure is relatively well-developed. No doubt there is more to be done before we can take full advantage of IT, but these are all positive factors that can propel the country towards a new trajectory of growth.

28. A nation must always think about tomorrow. It is in thinking about tomorrow that we have decided to harness the power of IT. The Government has committed itself to an active role in pursuing this endeavour. We will not only provide the necessary top-down leadership to promote IT development, but we will also orchestrate a societal push for it. Through this dual-approach, the Government will serve as the enabler of IT development. It is for this reason we adopted the National IT Agenda as a national development strategy. Through the NITA, we hope to generate ripples of change throughout the nation and throughout the shared world

that we live in.

29. The uniqueness of IT is that it is capable of touching every aspect of life, capable of transforming society holistically. What we have with the NITA is a vision of the future, but it is a vision that has yet to be realised. A vision devoid of action is merely an empty dream. We need to act and transform our nation. Let us go out to meet the most powerful forces of the information age and realise this vision.

30. Today, as I officially launch our national IT awareness campaign, I would like to ask Malaysians, young and old, rural and urban, Government and the opposition alike, to answer this 'call to arms' and support the nation's initiative in harnessing IT. Let us resolve to face the globalised world together. Let us strive to realise all that we wish for and not wait for it to happen.

God willing we will succeed.

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