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Sombre End to a Celebratory Year

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CONSCIOUSNESS about the growing lack of national unity and the ubiquity of ethnic distrust mark the end to what was to have been a celebratory year for Malaysia. The country turned 50 on Aug 31 and with it came much reflection and meditation. At the beginning of the year, most parties wanted to contribute to the atmosphere.

The Umno-controlled newspaper *The New Straits Times* had started running a week-long serialisation of the recently published book, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time*.

The aim — according to the decision-making editors — was to kick off the year in a contemplative mode and to remind Malaysians of the country's successful yet troubled past.

In general, anniversaries have an uncanny inclination to induce comparison. Thinking of the past invariably makes one think of the present and the span of time begs questions about how present realities differ from past dreams.

As the year wore on, speculations about an early election began to grow, reflecting a spreading wish for political change. The four years under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi have not been a peaceful period.

The winds of change died away too quickly. Yet, there was significant change. Otherwise, former Premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad would not have come out swinging his fist at his successor administration if that had not been the case.

As far as Dr Mahathir was concerned, Mr Abdullah had betrayed his heritage. Luckily for the government, Dr Mahathir's ill health kept him silent throughout the 50th anniversary year.

Some bright spots in an otherwise darkening sky were the celebrations around Aug 31, the relatively rational atmosphere at this year's Umno general assembly otherwise known for its shocking and racially provocative events and the sending of the first Malaysian — Dr Sheikh Mustaphar Sheikh Abdul Shukor — into space.

The “developmental corridors” that Mr Abdullah had launched in quick succession to cover most of the peninsula — being excessively ambitious when taken together — merely fanned speculation that elections would soon be called.

Strangely, what the Abdullah administration managed to do over the last four years with its selective, weak and piecemeal reforms was to alienate not only the shrinking Mahathir camp but also those who used to oppose the authoritarian leader.

Politicised appointments of top judges in the past and present continue to exasperate Malaysians who had been hoping for profound changes under Mr Abdullah.

Dubious electoral practices remain in place — the recent constitutional amendment passed for the sole purpose of keeping Mr Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman, the chairman of the Election Commission, in place to watch over the coming polls drew more Malaysians onto the streets in protest.

Sensitive overlaps between the Sharia courts and the civil courts remain, with the government relying on individual court decisions to settle the stream of cases concerning non-Muslims, new Muslims or Muslims who have lost their faith being caught in judicial no-man's land. Significantly, many of the highly publicised cases have involved Malaysian Indians.

Once the 50th anniversary celebrations were over, contemplation quickly gave way to action. On Sept 26, about 2,000 lawyers and their supporters marched to the Prime Minister's residence calling for proper investigations into allegations of inappropriate appointments of judges.

A widely publicised demonstration for electoral reforms on Nov 10 was banned the day the Umno general assembly ended, with Mr Abdullah saying that he would not be challenged. Over 30,000 Malaysians of all races, but largely Malays, took to the streets of central Kuala Lumpur that Saturday.

This was followed two weeks later by about the same number of Hindus trying to draw attention to the economic and existential plight of Malaysian Indians.

The draconian Internal Security Act — which allows for detention without trial — was used on five leaders of the Indian demonstration, just as it had been used on at least five

people in Johor suspected of sending phone messages inciting ethnic conflict in August, just before the national day celebrations.

On Dec 11, a planned rally outside Parliament House to protest against the constitutional amendment to keep the Election Commission chairman on for another year was stopped by riot police, who closed off all roads leading to the venue. About 27 people were arrested.

Despite some protests being cancelled in deference to governmental pressure, more street rallies by Malaysians are expected in the coming year — aimed at bringing the Abdullah government into open dialogue with non-governmental organizations and other low-level representatives.

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