

10/02/1997

## Kongsi Raya: Race and religion pose no barriers

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KONGSI Raya. This phrase may sit uneasy with linguists and sticklers of tradition, but it does sum up the double celebration nicely.

Taken from the Chinese greeting "Gongxi Fa Cai" and its Malay counterpart "Selamat Hari Raya", Kongsi Raya literally means "sharing the big day".

The new phrase has sneaked into Malaysian vocabulary almost unnoticed with hardly a raised eyebrow here.

It seems natural for Malaysians to wish each other "Kongsi Raya": Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has used it and it is also popular with young Malaysians who have taken to this outward symbolism of the coming together of two cultures in Malaysia.

It is also a clear signal that differences in race and religion are not barriers when it comes to celebrating festivals together.

The dual festive season has also given rise to Kongsi Raya greeting cards, Kongsi Raya music and of course, shopping on a grand Kongsi Raya scale.

There are rarely any official figures on how much is spent.

A street survey, however, will reveal that some of the happiest people during this double festival period are those in the retailing business.

The proximity of Christmas, the Western, Chinese and Muslim new years is virtually ringing cash registers non-stop for shopowners and it is the dream of a lifetime for marketing executives.

Droves of shoppers have been waiting to open their wallets and as the weekend drew near, it seemed half of Kuala Lumpur's residents were in the Bukit Bintang area, buying everything from computers to curtains for the festive season.

This despite the Government's bid to limit festive "special offers" to items such as food.

One obvious reason why people are spending like never before is that this festive season coincides with the time when Malaysians' level of disposable income is at an all-time high.

Year-end bonuses and ex-gratia payments, these have all come in and with the economy booming, this is surely a time for spending.

The double festival season and new-found spending power of Malaysians alerted the Government of a possible shop-till-you-drop outbreak and it became concerned enough to warn against over-spending.

The Muslim fasting month, preceding Hari Raya, is a period for exercising self-restraint and engendering feelings of empathy for those who are less unfortunate. These factors should work against inflation-linked spending, but trying to curb Malaysians from exercising their new-found purchasing power can be likened to stopping a speeding locomotive.

Another unstoppable force of Kongsi Raya is the exodus from the cities.

Last week's migration from big cities was not necessarily larger than previous years' because Malaysians tend to "balik kampung" at every possible excuse.

What seems to be unusual, however, is the absence of extremely disgruntled passengers at bus terminals normally seen at every festive season.

Then it was common to hear sad tales of forged tickets, buses that didn't turn up, missed festivals and crying babies as well. It was a pleasant surprise to hear that as of Wednesday, the Road Transport

Department had so far only received one forgery and two unauthorised fare increase complaints.

An estimated 1.5 million people have left Kuala Lumpur in this festive exodus, most of them in the four days from last Thursday, and motorists fears' of heavy traffic were realised. However, the combination of relentless warnings and traffic policemen dishing out summonses under the aptly-named Ops Pacak, have made a dent in road fatality statistics, a source of constant news for the media at festive periods.

The "balik kampung" syndrome also means the country will be running at about half-strength for the next week or so. The schools are closed for 12 days, enabling parents with school-going children to have ample time for celebrating.

In the past during festive seasons, automated teller machines (ATMs) have run out of cash but this time around, banks have been told to keep their ATMs well stocked for the five-day bank holiday this Kongs Raya.

Unlike Europe or the US, where everyone joins in Christmas festivities, regardless of beliefs, this is not quite so in Malaysia as Malaysians tend to enjoy celebrating festivals in their own unique way.

Still, it will be a while yet before Malaysians get out of this holiday mood as the next few years promise more dual festive celebrations.

As Hari Raya is based on a lunar calendar, at one time or the other it will be Kongs Raya in February, Raya Vali in October and Merry Raya in December.

For now, Selamat Kongs Raya!

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