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Let's raise the flag to show our love

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IN two days, we will be celebrating the 42nd anniversary of Merdeka. The occasion is important, although it tends to be taken lightly by some Malaysians.

These citizens will treat it as another public holiday to play golf, laze on the beach or just stay at home and watch television. Not much thought is given to its significance.

Flying the national flag is too much of a bother for them. Some are plain ungrateful, while others just don't care.

Lately, we even hear voices saying that they are not joining in the celebration because they do not agree with the Government.

Celebrating or, at the very least, observing this important occasion is not a political thing. It is a national event even if it happens to be organised by departments or agencies of the State.

But for those of us who treasure peace and harmony, this is a time to take stock of our lives and to count our blessings.

History can be an important guide. Those who were born before independence and remember what life was all about during the colonial days will have less problem appreciating the many good things that Merdeka has brought them.

To begin with, they no longer have to salute the Union Jack and sing God Save the Queen at assemblies. This is not to say that saluting the British flag and praying for the safety of the English Queen were such a terrible thing.

I did this for some years when I was schooling at Sekolah Melayu Pendang. It was even fun.

Merdeka day on Aug 31, 1957, was a special and memorable occasion as we assembled on the open field looking at the country's new flag and listening to Tunku Abdul Rahman crying "Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!". I was 10 years old.

As boys we did not fully understand what Merdeka was all about. We were told we were free of penjajahan (colonialism) and we would, from that point on, be determining our own future and destiny.

Our younger readers may accuse me of telling a grandmother's story. B-o-o-o-r-i-n-g, they may say. Yes, in a way I am telling a grandmother's story.

My dear departed grandmother loved Tunku deeply because he was an anak raja (prince). Still, she was worried that with the British gone, the Japanese would come back.

The Japanese did not return, but the armed communists took many more years to be defeated. Those who remember the hardship and the restrictions on life during the Emergency (1948-1960) will have a better appreciation of freedom.

Even boys like us wondered if the communist terrorists would descend upon our village from their jungle hideouts once the British left.

For years, our school football field was regularly used by the Commonwealth soldiers as a staging point in their operations against the terrorists in mountains and hills to the east.

We did not mind their presence. In fact a sort of camaraderie developed with the orang putih as we went around saluting them and getting sweets and other military rations in return.

Occasionally, we were allowed to take a close look at their "ferret

cars" - those little armoured vehicles that were used so effectively in the jungle warfare - and their huge field guns and communications equipment.

TODAY, we curse and swear if we are caught in traffic jams or police roadblocks. During the Emergency, police and military roadblocks were a reassuring sight. They were a symbol of security.

Travelling, either by bus or my grandfather's British-made Austin A40 from our village to an aunt's house in Selama, Perak, would take us through many kawasan hitam (black areas) and countless roadblocks.

Black areas were areas infested by communist terrorists, and movements of people and goods were restricted. Dusk-to-dawn curfews were imposed and the supply of food regulated.

At these roadblocks, every passenger had to alight from their vehicles and had their identity cards checked. What is not often known is that the IC was made mandatory during the Emergency as a means of separating the good from the evil.

The vehicles were thoroughly checked for food and weapons. The transport of foodstuff was regulated to ensure that they did not fall into the hands of the enemy.

The best way to avoid delays on such a trip was to carry only cooked food, sufficient for one meal.

The most dreaded part of the journey was along Sungai Ular between Kulim and Bandar Baru. There, on the lonely stretch of the road, many military and police convoys had been ambushed by terrorists.

The surrounding estates, which were then largely owned by British companies, were often attacked by the terrorists whose aim was to destroy the economy and demoralise the people. Today, roads and highways criss-cross the region and Kulim boasts some of the most sophisticated industries in the country. It is home to the country's largest high technology industrial park.

The mountains and hills which were the targets of nightly bombardment by the Commonwealth soldiers had a long time ago been turned into Federal Land Development Authority (Felda) schemes.

Today, the second- and third-generation settlers have little or no memory of those dangerous days when rubber tappers and village shopkeepers were brutally murdered by the terrorists in order to send a message as to who was the boss.

They are today teachers, doctors, engineers and politicians living a good life in towns and cities, thanks to the New Economic Policy (NEP). Of course, this does not stop some of them from denying that the policy had benefited them.

AND because the country has been at peace for a long time, many have taken it for granted.

Only those who lived through the Second World War, the Emergency and the riots of May 13, 1969, have a better appreciation of peace.

In multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysia, peace can only be guaranteed if the people live in harmony, which is something easier said than done.

The racial and religious harmony that we have been enjoying for decades is not something that happened by accident.

It is something that we have nurtured through a myriad of political, social and economic endeavours, some of which are unique to us and are often misunderstood and condemned by others.

As nations, big and small, collapsed under the weight of racial and religious discord, and hundreds of thousands die in bloody ethnic wars, we

stand out as an example of a multi-racial and multi-religious society that works.

Peace as we know it is not built on the strength of the law alone. It is founded on unity, tolerance and accommodation.

Yet we know just how easy it is to shake this foundation. Democracy that has been instrumental in building this foundation can also be the instrument to destroy it if it is not used wisely.

We saw this just under a year ago when, in the name of freedom and democracy, thousands of people were provoked to take to the streets to defy law and order.

The decision of the authorities not to act against the demonstrators in the early stages of the so-called reformasi was seen as a sign of weakness, and a signal to the perpetrators to organise even bigger and more violent demonstrations.

But when the authorities took steps to end these illegal assemblies and marches to protect law and order, they were accused of not respecting freedom and democracy.

TO really understand just how lucky we are in this country, comparison must be made with others.

I am reminded of a statement by our Special Representative to the United Nations Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad while accompanying the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, on an official visit to what was then the USSR in 1987.

He said those in Malaysia who subscribed to the socialist economic system and the communist ideology should be sent to the Soviet Union to see how lucky they were as Malaysians.

Even as we fell victim to the currency-induced recession, we are better off than most countries suffering the same fate.

Their economies might have recovered faster by a few months, but they suffered a higher level of unemployment, inflation and political instability. In some instances it led to bloodshed and rebellion.

They were forced to surrender their economic sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund, while their banks and companies went bankrupt or were sold to foreigners.

We realised early enough the danger of swallowing the IMF medicine after spending several months listening to its advice. During that time we raised interest rates, curbed credits and cut public sector expenditure. Our economy ground to a halt.

Despite worldwide condemnation of our limited capital controls and widespread prediction that we would become another Myanmar, we prevailed.

On Wednesday, Bank Negara governor Tan Sri Ali Abul Hassan Sulaiman announced a 4.1 per cent gross domestic product growth for the second quarter of the year. He said the country is "comfortably out of a recession".

Hours later, the US-based rating agency, Standard and Poor's, which for months had been making negative assessment of our economy, revised its outlook and predicted that our economy would grow by five per cent this year.

The news is the best Merdeka present for the Prime Minister who was willing to be unpopular at home and abroad for the sake of saving the economy and protecting the sovereignty of the country.

So, let us do our bit to show our love for the country by raising the flag on Merdeka day.

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