

**Wisdom and maturity must follow suit**  
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IT'S Merdeka Day and our 50th at that! Coming from Sarawak, I do want to emphasise that point. Time for truly justified celebrations and feeling a bit smug about where this independence ride has taken us all this far.

People will be described as middle-aged when they hit 50, whether they feel it or like it or not. Whatever their achievements or non-achievement in all these years, there can be no dispute that their accumulated life experiences mean they would have acquired at least a measure of wisdom in those years.

For nations, I am unsure how reaching the golden jubilee can best be described. Whatever it may be, nations marking the half-century watershed presumably can also no longer be considered young. They would have acquired some maturity even if they want to deny that they are fully mature, with all the attendant responsibilities this would imply.

In the sphere of foreign relations, there can be little doubt that we are responsible beyond our years and the actual weight we carry as a nation. Our armed forces have been active in global peacekeeping missions almost from Day One, starting with the Congo mission in the 1960s.

We are currently leading the international effort to keep the flickering beacon of peace from being extinguished in southern Philippines.

At home, we are making the most of an almost impossible social mish-mash that we inherited on winning the right to govern ourselves. The political and economic solutions we devised to fit our social conditions obviously defy easy and neat categorisation.

But the proof of the pudding, as always, is in the eating — and this rojak, otherwise known as our national social contract, has shown itself equal to if not better than the real thing, give or take a few blemishes, the most serious of which was, of course, May 13, 1969.

At the slight risk of being accused by some of perhaps raining on our own 50th birthday parade, however, I want to challenge my fellow Malaysians to resolve to be better. Much, much better.

Let us resolve to put our juvenile thoughts and pranks away for good.

Wrap yourself in the Jalur Gemilang this Merdeka Day and I will be there to cheer you on. Cover every inch of your car exterior with mini Jalur Gemilang this Merdeka Month and I will give you a hoot in support as I pass you by.

But resist the temptation to question the patriotism of fellow Malaysians whose idea of showing patriotism may be, well, not showing any visible outward sign at all. In any case, I will not regard a Malaysian with a life-size Jalur Gemilang emblazoned over his car as being anywhere near patriotic if he proceeded to weave in and out of traffic at speed in full view of everyone.

Proclaim as loudly as you want the special place of Sabah and Sarawak within our federation for all I care. The country may be celebrating 50 years of independence and 44 as Malaysia

but the special rights of these two states remain in place and will continue to be so unless and until the people of Sabah and Sarawak decide otherwise.

Not that the rest of Malaysia much cares one way or the other and, I dare say, quite a few from Sabah and Sarawak as well, by voting with their feet, moving westwards!

That said, I think it is high time our government weaned itself from the heavily state-directed way we commemorate Merdeka Day henceforth. It seems truly tragic that the minister in charge of the celebrations had been so preoccupied with preparations that he had precious little time left over for what would surely be a crowning achievement of 50 years of Merdeka: Getting himself elected as secretary-general of the Commonwealth.

Perhaps it is time a joint publicly and privately funded permanent Merdeka Day Commission be set up to rethink carefully and implement faithfully ways to make post-50 Merdeka Days most meaningfully commemorated, with no less pomp but much more solemnity in place of too brazenly jarring jingoism.

It is fitting and proper that Merdeka Month officially ends on Sept 16, the day that Malaysia came into being. It was 44 years ago that Merdeka Day became bigger and better to accommodate a larger federation.

So we should start thinking and planning today for six years down the road, when we commemorate the golden jubilee of Malaysia.

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