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THROUGHOUT my eleven years in national school in Malaysia, I must have recited the Rukun Negara several hundred times.

As young school children, it would have been unreasonable to expect anyone of us to fully understand what supremacy of the Constitution and rule of law meant, these being two of the principles that we used to recite religiously, apart from a belief in God, loyalty to King and country, and courtesy and morality.

Eventually, I did understand what supremacy of the Constitution and rule of law meant, but it definitely wasn't from reciting the Rukun Negara.

And honestly, even after I left school, began working, and got involved in Malaysian life as an adult, the Rukun Negara

mattered little, its relevance quickly fading away with little repercussion or regret.

The first time, after I had left school and the Monday assembly ritual of reciting the Rukun Negara, that I was reminded of how little it meant in real terms to many of us, was when I watched a documentary where a

senior Malaysian journalist was asked to recite the Rukun Negara. He could not.

The Rukun Negara has suddenly become fashionable again, so to speak.

With the approaching 50th national day celebrations, and with politicians contesting among themselves the nature of the social contract that our founding leaders agreed to upon independence, it seems imperative that we remind ourselves of the Rukun Negara's

objectives and principles.

There is really nothing wrong in that. Any attempt to recall our history and the values which this nation was founded on is a commendable one in the spirit of nation building.

However, what's problematic is this: how do we ensure that the Rukun Negara is made more meaningful than a mere recitation, a proliferation

of Information Ministry booklets, or an oft-used mantra by politicians and the media for our Merdeka celebrations?

I ask myself why the Rukun Negara made so little impact in my life. I went to good schools and had model teachers who tried to demonstrate what

values were worth living by. And yet, the Rukun Negara rings hollow, even more today than before.

And it's not because I don't subscribe to the Rukun Negara's principles and its vision of achieving unity, a democratic way of life, a fair and just society, a liberal way of life of all

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cultures, and a progressive society based on science and technology.

The problem, I think, lies in that these are mere words. Which sound good because they show good intent and universal values that all peace-loving Malaysians can subscribe to. But which remain just a shell if nothing is actually done to demonstrate that these values and objectives are being lived out in the public spheres of our lives as Malaysians.

I think of why I truly understand what showing kindness means within the context of the religion I was brought up in. And I know it's because my parents didn't just preach it to us when they raised

us, they also demonstrated what kindness meant – from giving food to our poorer neighbour to helping a stranger on the street from being beaten up.

Conversely, what has the national leadership done to "operationalise" the Rukun Negara so that it becomes a meaningful aspiration and experience for citizens?

As an adult, my experiences of nationhood are fraught with violations – endorsed, upheld and defended by the powers-that-be – of the principles of democracy and justice, and of faith in a just God. Examples abound: from the use of state religion to justify tearing apart families and

denying women their rights to the use of the Internal Security Act to detain without trial to the use of Rela to terrify and violate refugees, asylum seekers and transvestites. Forgive me if I find it hard to believe that upholding and living out the Rukun Negara is the state's top priority.

As we approach Aug 31, this is as good a time as any for us to remember the values underpinning the Rukun Negara if it serves to remind us of what Malaysia seems to be losing.

But words alone are easy. And we can recite them hundreds of times without changing a thing. And be the worse for it as a nation and a people.

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Shape of a Pocket

by Jacqueline Ann Surin

Reflections on the Rukun Negara

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