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A Preamble for our Constitution

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The Rukun Negara embodies the aims and principles which should guide our nation.

THE United Nations lists 190 sovereign states. Most of them possess codified and specially drafted constitutional charters.

Most Constitutions dazzle the reader with an inspiring opening, visionary statement called a Preamble. A Preamble is a mission statement.

It expresses the fundamental values and aspirations of the people. It explains the charter's purpose and underlying philosophy. It outlines the nature of the system and the foundational legacy of the forefathers. It seeks to bind the citizenry into a united nation.

Nearly 80% of the world's Constitutions contain Preambles. Surprisingly, the Malaysian Constitution does not have any glittering, expressionary statement to encapsulate the document's underlying philosophy!

For this reason, a few of us got together a few weeks ago to prepare a draft proposal for a Preamble to our document of destiny.

We soon discovered that in our nation's historical repository there is already a beautiful document that fulfils the function of a Preamble. It is the Rukun Negara, drafted between 1970 and 1971 by the then National Consultative Council and launched on Aug 31, 1970 by the then Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

The National Consultative Council consisted of a wide range of citizens, including 13 political parties representing 131 out of 144 seats in the 1971 Parliament. In the words of Syed Hussein Alatas, the Rukun Negara "embodies the aims and principles which should guide the Malaysian nation". It is a document of 20,000 words divided into three parts – an introduction, a declaration and a commentary.

Its wisdom is distilled in five sterling objectives and five stirring principles. The five objectives are: unity among Malaysians; a democratic way of life; a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably

shared; a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions; and a progressive society oriented to science and technology.

The five principles are: belief in God; loyalty to King and country; supremacy of the Constitution; rule of law; and good behaviour and morality.

In a period of doubt and cynicism in some minds about the supremacy of our Constitution, the Rukun Negara could provide a clarion call to respect the letter, spirit and historical background of the basic law.

The Rukun Negara calls on all Malaysians to respect our "agreement on fundamentals". It calls on people to live together in peace and harmony and to share the bounties that our land is endowed with.

It aspires towards a united nation in which all regard themselves as Malaysians irrespective of race or creed. It seeks the building of a society in which diversity of religions, customs and cultures is regarded as an asset and a source of strength. It cautions against abuse of democratic rights to promote communalism or to destroy democracy. It rejects behaviour that is arrogant or offensive to the sensitivities of any group. It forbids questioning the loyalty of any citizen on the ground that he/she belongs to a particular community.

It dedicates itself to a just society in which there is equality of opportunity for the weak and the disadvantaged and a fair and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth.

One hopes that the Rukun Negara could be relaunched as our nation's chart and compass. Perhaps the Constitution could be amended to incorporate its stirring objectives and principles as our supreme law's Preamble.

Alternatively, drawing on the wisdom and beauty of the Rukun Negara and adding to it some felt necessities of the times, one could craft a new Preamble for submission to our Government and Parliament.

A preliminary draft could read as follows:

"WE THE PEOPLE OF MALAYSIA

UNITED in our belief in God, supremacy of the Constitution, loyalty to King and country and respect for the rule of law;

COMMITTED to morality, integrity and social responsibility;

CONVINCED that respect for diversity assures economic progress and social well-being;

AND together determined to:

ACHIEVE unity and a sense of shared destiny amongst Malaysians of all cultures, religions and regions in the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak;

INCULCATE acceptance of and respect for our diverse religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic traditions;

GUARANTEE economic and social justice through the alleviation of poverty and the reduction of disparities between classes, communities, genders and regions;

CREATE a robust, resilient, self-reliant and sustainable economy where there is both prosperity and equitable distribution of wealth;

MANAGE our natural resources sustainably for the benefit of present and future generations;

ESTABLISH a democratic way of life and governance within a federal polity;

ENSURE an independent judiciary, a representative Parliament and a responsible, answerable and accountable executive;

ENHANCE transparency in the conduct of public affairs;

SECURE liberty, equality of opportunity, freedom with responsibility and other social and individual rights;

NURTURE a compassionate culture and society where the young and the aged and those facing physical and psychological challenges are cared for;

PROTECT AND ENHANCE the worth, value and dignity of every human being;

STRENGTHEN the family as a source of love, happiness, security and well-being for all its members;

PRESERVE peace, security and harmony;

SAFEGUARD national sovereignty in all aspects of life;

BUILD a progressive society balanced between science and technology and humanities and the arts; and

STRIVE towards the evolution of a united, just and compassionate world bound by our common humanity;

DO HEREBY ADOPT this Constitution as the supreme law of our land".

A Preamble so worded is, of course, imperfect. But it rests on the belief that the Constitution will be revived when there are enough people who stand up for it and do something about it.