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A fresh thrust for Rukunegara

THE Rukunegara should be made the preamble (*Muqadimmah*) to the Malaysian Constitution. There are seven compelling reasons for suggesting this.

One, the objectives of the Rukunegara are linked to values which are perennial such as unity, justice and freedom. Preambles of most constitutions embody this timeless quality since they are meant to serve people beyond the present.

Two, the objectives and principles of the Rukunegara are inclusive. They transcend gender, ethnicity, religion and region. This is what makes the Rukunegara, potentially, a force for unity in a diverse society.

Three, the Rukunegara commands a high degree of legitimacy. All of its principles and objectives resonate with the vast majority of Malaysians.

This includes Belief in God, on the one hand, and commitment to a democratic way of life, on the other.

Besides, this national philosophy was produced by a National Consultative Council (NCC) which represented a wide cross-section of our society.

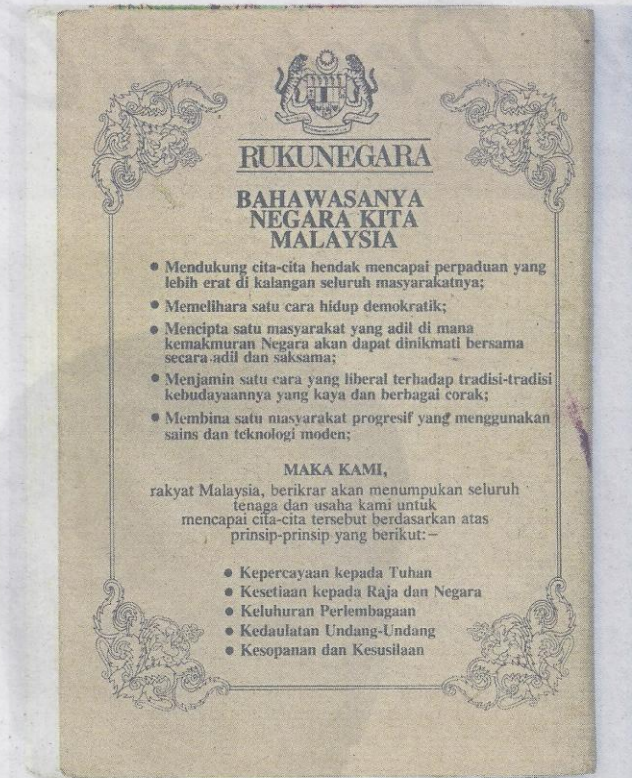
All religious groups had seats in the Council. Both labour and business were included. All major political parties from the government and the opposition, with the exception of one, participated in the NCC under the chairmanship of Tun Abdul Razak.

It is equally significant that the Rukunegara was proclaimed to the nation by the Yang di Pertuan Agong himself on Aug 31, 1970.

Four, given its legitimacy, inclusiveness and timelessness, the Rukunegara should now be endowed with the force of law. Only then will the courts be able to bestow it with meaning and substance.

Five, since perceptions of state and society have become more and more polarised in recent years, it would make sense to bring back to the centre a philosophy which has the capacity to draw people together.

There is no reason why



Malaysians of different backgrounds and persuasions should not rally around a set of objectives and principles like the Rukunegara.

Six, the elevation of the Rukunegara has become imperative partly because of the sometimes subtle push by sections of the Muslim populace for laws and policies that reflect their own interpretation of Islam which does not always represent the essence of the faith and its practice.

Because this tendency is getting stronger, we have to empower a philosophy which is all-embracing and yet resonates with Islamic values and aspirations. *Panca Sila*, the guiding principles of the Indonesian state which has many parallels to the Rukunegara and is deeply rooted in the psyche of the people, has undoubtedly played an effective role in checking bigotry

and dogmatism in the world's largest Muslim nation.

Seven, as against the bigotry of some Muslim groups, there is a trend associated with a segment of the non-Muslim citizenry that in the name of hidebound secularism, seeks to deny religion any role at all in the public square.

In a society where Islam has been fundamental in shaping the identity of the majority, it is naïve to try to marginalise the religion when addressing societal concerns.

It is how Islam is understood and practised that is the critical challenge. The Rukunegara at least attempts through its first principle, Belief in God, to articulate a universal vision of faith that transcends religious boundaries which is reinforced in its fifth principle by a notion of good behaviour and morality that is not confined to a

specific community.

The quest to make the Rukunegara the preamble of the Malaysian Constitution has a long history. In early 1971, the late Professor Syed Hussein Alatas in an essay titled "The Rukunegara and the Return to Democracy in Malaysia" argued that the Rukunegara could fulfil the function of a preamble, saying "it reflects the predominant trend in the political and philosophical thinking of the nation."

After the Rukunegara was inaugurated as the nation's philosophy in August 1970, Tun Razak and his Deputy, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, gave some emphasis to the document through schools and the media. On their demise in the mid-70s, Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn and one of his key ministers, Tun Muhammad Ghazali Shafie, continued to champion the Rukunegara. It was from the 80s onwards that the national philosophy began to recede into the background.

In 2005 and 2006, there was a brief effort to revive the document but it did not take off.

From the early 80s, a handful of us - civil society activists and academics - tried to keep the Rukunegara alive through our writings and via seminars and forums. The Rukunegara's objectives and principles were used as yardsticks to measure the performance of the powers-that-be. But our modest endeavours did not make a dent.

Now, some of us are once again seeking to raise the status and role of the Rukunegara. In the midst of the new challenges that have surfaced, making the Rukunegara the preamble to the Constitution would give it the weight and value it deserves.

It would be so much easier for the citizen to insist that those who wield power and authority should through their deeds prove that they are genuinely committed to the objectives and principles of the Rukunegara.

DR CHANDRA MUZAFFAR
Chairman, Board of Trustees
Yayasan 1Malaysia