

IN six days we will turn 62 and I sometimes wonder if those six decades have taught us anything at all. Have we capitalised on the wisdom of these long years to know what we want for ourselves, for our children and for our country? Or are we only able to see just beyond the tip of our noses and no more?

I must say that I have been puzzled by several pronouncements over the past month. First was this decision to introduce khat in vernacular schools, a decision that apparently was made in the previous government. To me, that provenance alone is good enough reason to have nixed the entire plan. Instead, in a classic case of giving yourself avoidable grief, our Education Ministry goes ahead and announces it.

The logic, if there was any at all, escapes me. Why talk about art forms at all when our kids barely get exposed to any of the arts?

Even if it is meant to be an additional writing system, has anyone assessed what future use it would have?

We used to complain about irrelevant mathematical formulas in school but at least some could be used in real life. Khat can really only be mastered after years of study if you want to be a master calligrapher.

I've been learning brush calligraphy. It's a nice skill to have but only a few of us will make a living out of it. And as far as Jawi is concerned, I believe the only Jawi newspaper we had folded a long time ago for lack of readership.

I must say I was equally puzzled

Wither our Merdeka spirit

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by the furore from those who feared that khat was a step closer to the proselytisation of Islam.

If all it takes to convert people is a writing system, then I fear for the strength of some people's faith.

As far as I know nobody has converted to Taoism by learning to write Chinese.

Similarly, nobody should worry about khat's supposed hidden religious power. It is quite possible, I am sure, to write swear words in Jawi if you were so inclined.

On each side either people feel threatened by a writing system or by the refusal to accept this imposition.

Is this a good way of spending one's time? But I return to my original gripe: it was all unnecessary angst. In the end we're back to square one. In retrospect, it's probably more worthwhile to encourage children to write with fountain pens again since typing sentences has probably done untold damage to handwriting. Let's have a letter-writing competition with actual pen and ink and judge them on the quality of handwriting and content. Now that would actually be

educational.

But that is a small issue compared to some others that beset us these days. I hope that some people are finally waking up to the presence of a tumour in our society that threatens to metastasize and spread all over our collective body.

Once upon a time we decided take in a carcinogen and allowed it to breed.

Despite the poison it kept emanating, we turned a blind eye to the toxins that were spreading.

I hope we woke up early enough to stem the flow. It's heartening to see so many voices speaking up warning of the dire consequences of not removing the tumour soon. Already we see some hotheads wanting to behead those who are raising the red flag about the danger. I'd like to know how their lives are improved by such vileness. Is the path to heaven lined with hatred?

Sixty-two years ago, we freed ourselves from the yoke of colonialism. Yet, since then we have only tethered ourselves to other aspiring colonialists, outsiders who insist on telling us how we should

live as a society. The premise is clear: we don't know how to determine our own lives, so someone else has to tell us how to do it. In their dubious mould of course.

We worship at the feet of foreigners because they wear beards and skullcaps. Supposedly we chafe at any attempt to introduce languages other than our own in our schools, but we don't mind listening to someone with a barely comprehensible accent speaking in what apparently passes for English. How low are our standards! How easily are we fooled by the most superficial veneers of religiosity!

We claim rightly that ours is a religion of peace, that it is certain people who interpret it wrongly and give it a bad name. Here we have the prime example of someone besmirching the image and still we defend it. Even when our hospitality, the one that all Malaysians are known for, is abused.

Our independence was built on a generosity of spirit and willingness to accommodate. That has served us well for most of our nation's lifetime. Sure, there have been glitches

here and there, but we have always learnt from those mistakes and moved on. Now we have the best chance to write a new inclusive chapter in our country's history, for the sake of our children. Can anyone imagine a Malaysia that is not full of a diverse array of peoples and expect to have all the things we have gotten used to?

I don't want to gloss over our problems. We have plenty still. But we need to sit down and solve them ourselves. We don't need anyone else pouring oil on the fire. It's just not their business, especially when they're dependent on our hospitality. A guest needs to respect the kindness of their host.

As the Quran says in Chapter 31, verse 19: And be moderate in thy pace, and lower thy voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass. (translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

Selamat Hari Merdeka everyone!

Marina Mahathir only listens to people who speak softly and with a smile in their eyes. The views expressed in the article are entirely her own.