

REKINDLE THE SPIRIT OF MERDEKA

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AUG 31, 1957 was the day the flag of the Federation of Malaya was unfurled in the capital Kuala Lumpur. The day has been celebrated since as Merdeka Day.

Malaysia was formed in 1963 by the coming together of the Federation, Singapore and the two states in North Borneo, Sabah and Sarawak. In 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia over political and economic issues.

On Merdeka Day, the country needs to celebrate our history, honour the people's socio-cultural roots and praise our economic achievements. More importantly, it will be a day to remember the sacrifices and contributions of the country's leaders and the people all throughout the years.

Come Aug 31, this country will observe its 63rd year since inde-

pendence under rather strange circumstances: battling the spread of Covid-19 with tremendous success, the government making progress with implementing practical policies and the economy seeing some remarkable upswings.

In experiencing a common past, Malaysians have come to realise that this so-called spirit of Merdeka needs to be rekindled time and again. We can begin by shining the light on the geostrategic, economic and ethnic past.

In geostrategic terms, the country's location at the crossroads of two monsoons (the northeast and the southwest), sitting astride several oceans (the Indian Ocean to its west and the South China Sea and the larger Pacific Ocean to its east, connected by the Straits of Malacca), has brought to its shores the "Hindu-ised"

kingdoms and empires in Southeast Asia: Langkasuka in Kedah, the Malay Sultanate in Melaka, from the Hindu kingdom of Srivijaya in Sumatra and from Bugis Muslims from Makassar in Indonesia.

Across the ocean from China came the Chinese during the Ching and Ming periods. Then came the Portuguese in 1511, and the British in 1824. Islam came to the peninsula through Indian traders in the 12th and 14th centuries. Evidence of this has been found in the Batu Bersurat discovered in Terengganu in 1887.

In economic terms, during British rule from 1784 to 1965, to spur economic development in the country, the administration undertook a policy to bring in Chinese labourers to work in rubber plantations, tin mines, rice fields and retail trading. This was followed by the migration

of labourers brought in from India for the country's public works management and expansion beginning in 1907.

Concerns on the position of ethnic Malays came to be addressed through the management of the monarchy and Malay rights.

Issues affecting the Malay psyche and the moulding of unity among the different ethnic groups would require the intervention of the monarchical system in the country and the paramount ruler, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, functioning as a symbol of national unity and the constitutional defender and protector of Malay rights and privileges.

These have helped maintain stability and prosperity in the country since the constitutional monarchy and the parliamentary democracy system came into force on

Merdeka Day.

Of interest to Malaysians since the 1900s has been the issue of the economic disparities between the three ethnic groups due to the policies imposed by the colonial administration to limit Malays from moving into urban areas.

A specific case can be stated to illustrate this situation. Then Sultan of Selangor, Sultan Abdul Samad, moved to proclaim a piece of land in the middle of Kuala Lumpur as a domicile for Malays to live and run their businesses. The Malay enclave, known as Kampung Baru, headed by a penghulu, the most noteworthy being Datuk Katib Koyan from Sumatra, was proclaimed in 1924.

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