

# THE 2 CRUCIAL MALAYSIAN DOCUMENTS

NSF-2018/2020 pg. 15

Federal Constitution, Rukun Negara are essential frameworks of multiculturalism

**O**N Aug 31, Malaysia celebrates its 63th independence day. The multicultural character of Malaysia (then Malaya) precedes her independence.

The traditionally predominant Malay demography saw drastic changes during the British colonial period when hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Indian migrant workers were brought in.

The then migrant workers shared very little similarities with the indigenous Malays and were often isolated from one another.

The Chinese concentrated in the tin mining sector, while the Indians primarily worked in rubber estates. The Chinese were generally Buddhists and



**DR  
MOHAMED  
AZAM  
MOHAMED  
ADIL**

practitioners of Taoism, while a majority of Indians were Hindus.

Across time, interactions between ethnic groups increased, and Chinese and Hindu temples, as well as other places of worship, flourished next to mosques and surau throughout the country. Today, Malaysia's population is 60 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent of other beliefs.

Inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia continue to be underscored by a high spirit of tolerance and acceptance despite brief periods of strain. The Federal Constitution plays an essential role in cultivating

such levels of unity and harmony.

On the surface, the Federal Constitution may seem to be favouring the Malays, with special provisions given to the position of Islam (Article 3); the special position of the Malays, and later in 1963, the natives of Sabah and Sarawak (Article 153); Bahasa Melayu as the national language (Article 152); and the position of the Malay Rulers (Article 38).

These, however, were critical to the social contract historically agreed between the three largest political parties representing the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

In return for these provisions, non-Malays were foremost accorded citizenship, along with other essential rights such as religious freedom, cultural rights, educational rights and economic rights. Politically, ruling governments have always been composed of a coalition between the three largest ethnic groups (now including other smaller ethnic groups).

In brief, the Malaysian plural

society can be described as a rainbow. In other words, unity is achieved without sacrificing people's unique ethnic, religious, cultural and regional identities. However, the widening economic gap between the Malays and non-Malays has become a significant concern.

On May 13, 1969, inter-ethnic tension escalated into riots, assaults, arson, protests and bloodshed. This brief but dark episode witnessed the suspension of the Constitution and the formation of the National Operations Council as a caretaker government to restore order and peace.

As a consequence, the Rukun Negara was introduced as the Malaysian national philosophy on Aug 31, 1970. Among the primary goals of Rukun Negara are to realise Malaysia's ambition to enhance the unity of its people; safeguard the spirit of democracy; establish a just society; maintain a liberal approach in addressing diversity; and create a progressive and technologically advanced society.

Since then, the Federal Constitution and the Rukun Negara have become the two most essential frameworks of multiculturalism for the nation.

There are also voices arguing that the social contract established in 1957 is now obsolete. Such demands go against the spirit of unity and mutual respect, which has been the bedrock of the nation for generations.

The Constitution is a document born out of the spirit of moderation, balance and "give and take" between the Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras. It is a bulwark against extreme ideologies and a remedy for inter-ethnic tensions.

Additionally, the principles espoused by the Rukun Negara are essential. It is a visionary document that strives to reduce economic inequalities between Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras and to unite all Malaysians.

The writer is International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia deputy chief executive officer