

# The real meaning of Merdeka

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As we celebrate our 63rd National Day, we need to take heed of the colonialisation cloaked in local colours still prevalent around us.

IT'S our 63rd Merdeka tomorrow and as is my habit every year, it turns my mind to thinking about this word "Merdeka". In English, it is often translated as either "independence" or "freedom".

Independence seems to be the more common interpretation. Our foremothers and fathers fought hard to regain the right to determine the course of our country for ourselves. No more would other people, no matter how well-meaningly they couch their intentions, tell us what's good for us because they assume they know better.

That's the central conceit of colonialism, that colonisers know better than the colonised. The root of that assumption is of course racism, that certain races are superior to others and therefore, out of the so-called generosity of their hearts, they should impart their advanced knowledge to inferior ones.

That this entire project benefited the colonisers more than the colonised should not be ignored. The basis for empire is always economics, not altruism. While we may get sentimental about the systems that the British left us, make no mistake those very systems ensured they could rule us for 130 years with impunity and made them lots of money to grow their economies, not ours.

The legacies they left us are not only a parliamentary system and road signage but also laws like the Sedition Act, meant to ensure that the "natives" never got uppity towards their masters. Today we use it against our own people, with no sense of irony at all. But then again, irony has never been our

strong suit.

I sometimes wonder if, in the name of "independence", and in throwing off the yoke of colonisation, we have attempted to also discard the traits that we feel enabled us to be ruled over by foreign powers. In some ways shaking off the submissive stereotype and becoming more self-confident is useful to withstand the inevitable onslaught of globalisation. But self-confidence can easily morph into hubris, in believing that absolutely nobody is better than us, a belief as unfounded as bleach curing Covid-19.

All you need do is to travel out into the world and you'll realise that there are plenty of things that other people do better than us, from ensuring clean toilets to better public transport to preserving their cultural heritage to just plain sensitivity and kindness to those who are different from them.

Instead, in believing that self-puff-upperiness is a necessary condition of 'independence', we have now made shamelessness a trending trait. Today there are people who show off their riches and lifestyles without the slightest hint of coyness about how they got them. Young boys with no known qualifications, never mind track records of hard work and achievement, post Instagram photos of themselves on private jets with the hashtag #youngbillionaire.

Fathers, already holding high office with not a modicum of expertise, unashamedly write on their official letterheads a request to put their sons on corporate boards supposedly to give them "experience". Presumably they



**Freedom and independence:** August is a good time to remember how our foremothers and fathers fought hard to regain the right to determine the course of our country for ourselves.

want to experience first-class air tickets and fast cars but do not have the patience, let alone the brains, to get them the normal way.

Then there's the lot who feel no shame in touting their VIP credentials to get away with rules and regulations. At the height of the MCO, there were people, whose only credential is a bloodline, going about visiting people while everyone else had to stay home under pain of excessive fines and jail terms.

There are many of us who would like to be able to travel abroad for necessary reasons but who are deterred by the need to quarantine ourselves in a hotel for 14 days when we get home. But if you are a VIP, you can go for a pleasure trip with your entire family, come home and not quarantine at all. In fact you shamelessly go to all sorts of meetings as if you'd not been anywhere.

No matter how many apologies and how many months' salary is given up, the point is that, had there not been a whistleblower, we would never have known about this double standard, one that could potentially have endangered other people. I wonder what that old lady who got fined RM8000 and had to endure half a day's jail felt when she read that.

Then there's the Great

Unashamed One. Once upon a time the idea of a criminal conviction is one that we hope never to have or never gets found out should we have one. Even Harvey Weinstein had the self-awareness not to be seen in public too much once his charges of sexual harassment were made known.

Here, in this era of extraordinary shamelessness, a vice treated like a virtue, we go around wielding the thickest of skins declaring our innocence at every opportunity. The bright side of it is that it constantly reminds us of the crimes committed, and hopefully spurs closer interest in the many more charges to come.

The other definition of Merdeka is of course freedom. There are some people who define freedom as something bad and immoral as if the only freedoms anyone wants is to go around dressed half-naked. When after World War II colonised people talked about freedom, it was not the right to dress how they wanted that they were concerned about. Colonisation was a bit like having that police officer's knee on George Floyd's neck; it makes you unable to breathe. Your opportunities were circumvented by the colour of your skin.

Today, despite our supposed independence, we're still gasping for breath. Our opportunities are

determined not just by the colour of our skin but by whether we toe the party line or not. And the current doctrine is shamelessness, in its most full blown form. How else can someone tout his ability to write support letters as the reason why people should vote for him? Would such a gormless candidate have become head of a women's wing if all other candidates had not been first expelled from the party?

Few seem to notice that this is just colonialisation cloaked in local colours. Preceding our rules, regulations and laws with religious invocations doesn't make them just. If anything, injustice just insults the religions you hide behind.

You have to believe people are inferior and stupid to swallow some of the excuses handed out like cheap candy. Politicians as check-and-balance guardians of companies? Defections based on principles? Right...

This year, my suggestion for the most appropriate theme for our Merdeka celebrations is "Freedom from Bull Manure".

**Marina Mahathir would like to have freedom from tacky hashtags this Merdeka. The views expressed here are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of Sunday Star.**