

# Embracing the Rukun Negara

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The National Day celebrations were a toned down affair but displays of affection and patriotism carried on in a big way on social media and in the hearts of Malaysians.

IN Seremban on Aug 31 this year, there were no schoolchildren waving flags, no uniformed officers performing perfectly synchronised salutes, no platoons of rifle-spinning soldiers, no giant Jalur Gemilang held preciously yet tautly by trusted hands, no daredevil acrobatics through fiery hoops by special forces, no fleets of ambulances or fire trucks, no rumbling of PT-91M tanks with their crew turning as their turrets pass the royal dais, no spirited shouts of "kiri, kiri, kiri kanan kiri" from NGO leaders unused to military precision, no flag-bearing daredevils chosen more for their parachuting skills than their interest in vexillology, and no demonstrations of silat or silambam by fearless kids ready to use their skills against a real enemy of the nation.

Being involved in a National Day parade is an indelible memory for countless Malaysians, and thousands would have been denied the opportunity this year, with the constraints caused by Covid-19 still in place.

As a consolation for spectators at

least, social media quickly reminded us of the high-energy displays of patriotism of previous years.

This is not to say that there were no physical events at all.

In similar vein to the scaled-down events for Hari Raya Haji in Seri Menanti, or to Maal Hijrah at the state mosque in Seremban (in which the usual Tokoh Maal Hijrah awards were replaced by appreciation to frontliners in the fight against the coronavirus), the usual Merdeka festivities at Seremban's main padang were replaced by a small, stationary yet meaningful event.

Following the singing of the *Negaraku* and the state anthem – face masks bearing the state crest would have concealed anyone unsure of the lyrics, but then again, the rendition for brass instruments is normally heard rather than sung – the state mufti led a prayer for peace, unity and public health framed by the still-new practice of beating of a bass drum to signify when Muslims should simultaneously raise and drop their hands for the supplication.

The Mentri Besar, making his way from his seat beside the Yang di-Pertuan Besar and ruling chiefs, joined his state executive councillors, spaced as equally apart as the military band nearby, to lead in the recitation of the Rukun Negara.

Beginning with the full preamble that speaks of a democratic way of life, a liberal approach and a progressive society, drumbeats once again marked each of the five principles repeated by all present.

The Rukun Negara featured prominently at the federal level, too, with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in his royal address reminding citizens not to merely repeat it symbolically, but to live according to its ideals.

This was most appropriate, given that unlike other visions of national ideals, the Rukun Negara was proclaimed 50 years ago by his predecessor as federal monarch, Sultan Ismail Nasiruddin Shah who, as a signatory to both the 1948 and 1957 Federation of Malaya Agreements, had participated in the constitutional evolution of the country.

That the Rukun Negara emerged out of a period of great concern for civil unrest following riots in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 (the aftermath of which Sultan Ismail, a noted photographer, recorded with his camera) makes it even more apt, serving as a reminder that out of perilous times, sustainable visions of unity may emerge.

For some years there have been efforts to formally elevate the Rukun Negara into a preamble of our Federal Constitution (something that would require the approval of two-thirds absolute majority in both the Dewan Rakyat and Dewan Negara), and it is interesting that former Youth and Sports minister Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman has said that both these documents will serve as the cornerstone of the ideology of his new party which, while explicitly embracing Malaysians irrespective of race and religion, invokes a different demographic marker, that of age (unless, of course, youth is a state of mind).

The corporate sector too, beyond the usual Merdeka discounts and

promotions, embraced the Rukun Negara.

I, along with other directors of Allianz Malaysia, recited it in full, complementing the company's efforts to harness intellectual depth and historical understanding in the awareness of being Malaysian.

Through a newly established collaboration with the cultural organisation Pusaka, a series of 10 books will explore the foundations of the nation and aim to provide material for public education and a broader discussion on Malaysia's history, present and future.

Looking at the social media content already published, I am excited to see how this develops.

As ever, the critical step is translating this enthusiasm about the Rukun Negara into its long-term inculcation into the hearts and minds of young Malaysians, lest annual reminders of its importance become as performative as its weekly school recitation.

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