

Working on freedom from want

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THE Merdeka celebrations this year have been scaled down to reflect the current economic reality.

The worldwide downturn will be lingering a while longer, impacting many economies.

It is befitting that we are observing the nation's independence with some measure of restraint.

Already, it is very heartening to note that the Federal Government's external debt has reached a new low of RM19.6 billion, or 7.3 per cent of the total debt, as of Dec 31 last year.

This is an exemplary move to further emphasise our seriousness in trying to instil some discipline in coping with troubling times ahead.

Merdeka is not belittled in any way, neither does it imply that the sacrifices of those who had given their lives to fight for the nation's sovereignty are being marginalised.

On the contrary, we are continuing the patriotic efforts to sustain the country's independence by hedging against any possible economic collapse.

Otherwise, we could land up in a state of dependency, making our Merdeka meaningless. This can take several subtle forms, unless we are vigilant in exercising our option to stay independent.

It is, therefore, imperative that we revisit the meaning of Merdeka, something that has been taken for granted by many for the last 50 years.

While newly independent nations tend to showcase their economic success as a mark of independence, this may not be sufficient unless it is accompanied by an equally independent mindset and also an acceptable quality of life.

In this regard, we must recognise what the leaders have done in leading the nation on this path of prosperity.

Merdeka Day is the most appropriate time to pay tribute to them. More so when we compare where we are today to that of other nations that attained their independence the same year (1957). Malaysia is often used to represent an "exemplary successful independent nation" with its counterparts languishing in dire straits.

We must be grateful for this though we cannot rest on our laurels because of the changing times and new challenges. We must play our role in deepening our understanding of what Merdeka means, especially for the benefit of the post-1957 generation.

No doubt we have been extremely fortunate to savour the fruits of independence without undergoing too much hardship. So it is now payback time.

The time to prepare for any form of "hardship" is here once again, though perhaps nowhere near what it was in the pre-1957 period.

To be sure, the carefree days are over. It is time to accept that everything has a price tag if independence is to be preserved.

One "freedom" that needs to be urgently relearned, given the increase in cost of living, is the "freedom from want".

This means the "excessive" lifestyles and practices which are no longer sustainable must be reviewed so that life becomes more equitable.

There is also the widening gap between the rich and the poor, now a source of worry in many economically rich Asian countries as this situation poses a socio-economic problem.

If we insist on wanting what we used to have in superfluous ways, we are bound to see socio-economic upheavals sooner than we think. Freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.

People who are hungry and do not have the means of supporting themselves cannot be considered truly free. There is, therefore, a need to be restrained and resourceful.

From this standpoint, the timing of Merdeka this year cannot be better, being a day just before the commencement of the month of Ramadan—the fasting month for Muslims.

The next 30 days or so would be the best time to begin our struggle against the "freedom from want".

This coincides with the objective of Ramadan: to be without not only food and drink from dawn to dusk, but also all forms of emotions, desires and carnal desires.

It enjoins us to do charity, give alms and share worldly gains with the needy and destitute. It aims at creating empathy with the less fortunate by building a more enriched humanity with Godly love for everlasting peace and harmony.

As we celebrate Merdeka today, let us do so with the new realisation to liberate ourselves mentally and have "freedom from want" in the challenging times ahead.

Perhaps this is how we should articulate what Merdeka means in this day and age.

Wishing all Muslim readers Selamat berpuasa! And a Happy Merdeka to all!

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