

## Language is the soul of our nation

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THE issue of the social contract, or rather the need to revise it, has risen again. This matter was last raised by a minister a few years ago, who has since retired.

The social contract has been a convenient political football from time to time. The argument seems to be that after 50 years of independence, the contract is not considered relevant any more. This, of course, is a moot point that must be examined in the context of pre-independent Malaya.

The social contract should be taken as an important negotiated document that eventually led to the birth of a new independent sovereign nation.

In countries where such birth was "fought" for, invariably with thousands of lives lost, it gave birth to a nation named after the distinct dominant community there.

After all, they were the community that laid down their lives for the noble cause. Hence, the Filipinos were "rewarded" with the Republic of Philippines. Similarly, Republik Indonesia.

Despite the presence of migrant groups in these newly independent countries, they quickly became part of the homogenous demographics in almost all aspects.

They took local names, regardless of their cultural beliefs and religious practices.

They spoke the dominant local language fluently, understood the deeper cultural nuances and, to a large extent, adopted them as though they were their own.

Their mother tongue gave way in preference to the national unifying language. It followed that there were no vernacular schools within the national education system.

In other words, the newer generations of these new nations, local and migrants alike, were very conversant with this way of life as citizens of the proudly independent country.

Even the older generation did their best to adapt and seemed resigned to accept their new way of life.

It is not surprising then that to the casual outsiders, including tourists, these were perfectly homogenous countries with virtually no discernible differences among the citizens.

This, however, was not the case for Malaya, or Malaysia, as its birth gave rise to a myriad of cultural, ethnic and religious distinctions.

For Malaya, history took a significantly different route, which is not necessarily bad. *Persekutuan Tanah Melayu* (literally Federation of Malay-land) existed long before independence in 1957.

The dominant Malay population, which at one time made up more than 90 per cent of the inhabitants, now had Chinese and Indian immigrants for company.

Over time, the original "Malay-land" designation was dropped. The language became known as Bahasa Malaysia, rather than Bahasa Melayu. In some ways, this was felt by the Malays as a loss of Malay-ness as they believed that "*bahasa jiwa bangsa*" (language is the soul of a nation).

Ironically, as this happened, the other ethnic communities clung ever more tightly to their roots in several aspects.

Thus, it is hardly surprising to come across Malaysians who can hardly speak good Bahasa Malaysia, including some members of parliament.

Given the current preoccupation with the English language, not mastering the national language is no big deal any more.

One cannot imagine a Filipino not being able to speak Tagalog fluently, or an Indonesian Bahasa Indonesia, or Thais the Thai language. The subtle cultural nuances and practices of the Malay community are also not appreciated.

So the kris, songkok, position of sultans and the usage of certain words are seen now as problematic just

because a few chose to flaunt their ignorance.

As though this is not enough to keep the others happy, another sacrifice is expected of them, this time in matters of the social contract.

The pressure will be mounting, as the indigenous and local communities continue to weaken further. It all began when, as a nation, we failed to understand the subtleties of *bahasa jiwa bangsa* and *kacang lupa kan kulit*.

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