

## Power of kongsi Merdeka

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**AS we celebrate *Merdeka* on Aug 31, it may be useful to revisit a concept that was deemed to be the lynchpin towards an independent Malaya and subsequently Malaysia in less than two decades later.**

This is the concept of *perkongsian*, an unwritten social contract of sort between the various communities.

Vaguely, *perkongsian* can be translated to mean "sharing", but not quite. The root word, *kongsi*, is of Chinese origin and has at least two meanings.

Summarily, one refers to a shared place of community living which could be likened to a present-day idea of a dormitory, except that a *kongsi* then was used to house Chinese coolies.



COMMON CELEBRATION: Fireworks display at the start of Merdeka month celebration in Johor Baru on Thursday.

Yet what is significant is that sharing in a *kongsi* leads to a form of understanding and harmonious living, and at times visions, based on a notion of a common good.

The words *kongsi gelap* highlights this point well, although it is used mainly to mean secret society.

What is illustrative is that members of the *kongsi gelap* believe in a common good and would vow not to bring ill-fate to any of its members, even the families and the community that houses it.

This leads to the second meaning of *kongsi*, that is, sharing in a close-knit way characterised by inter-dependability and inter-dependence.

Many Chinese clans had formed *kongsi* for this purpose which exists until today.

Malaysians from all walks of lives have, one way or another, been touched by the spirit of *perkongsian*, especially so during festivals celebrated by the various ethnic groups and religions.

This is especially so through the unique phenomena of *rumah terbuka* where the experience of *perkongsian* is most telling.

At one point, we even celebrate a *kongsi raya*. Yet the experience can be more lasting and nobler in that it shapes the history and aura of a nation.

The Malay community for sure has undergone one such experience.

In fact, the word *kongsi* is so powerful that it has become integrated into the Malay language with its version of the meaning "share" — an epitome of *perkongsian* in itself.

This is evident enough when the same concept became the basis of the struggle to achieve independence among the various communities in the then Federated Malay States, Unfederated Malay States and the Straits Settlements.

In fact, the meaning of *kongsi* is widened and strengthened further with the concept of *bertolak ansur* which means "to give and take" — a practice prevalent in the Malay community.

This is an equally important key concept for the Malays which goes a long way to preserve and enhance a harmonious and peaceful relationship.

After all, *bertolak ansur* is always understood as a "win-win" formula that would sustain the cohesiveness of the community at large.

Where the concept breaks down, the community is placed at a risk of being disrupted (such as the May 13 riots of 1969); sometimes resulting in splintering off (maybe the departure of Singapore from Malaysia is one example) which could be accompanied by confrontation, if not bloodshed.

On the contrary, when *bertolak ansur* is embedded as an integral meaning of *perkongsian*, it could lead to a birth of a nation as was the case of the Federation of Malaya.

In the pristine spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*, the word "Malay States" or "*Tanah Melayu*" were consciously substituted with Malaya, later Malaysia.

More than that, as one eminent Malaysian commentator observed: "Post-*Merdeka* Malays have to be content as no more than a community co-existing interdependently with a high degree of interdependability with the various communities in Malaya/Malaysia.

"The grand idea of a Malay motherland was put on the back-burner — never to be revived again!"

It must be noted too that the spirit of *bertolak ansur-perkongsian* also re-configured the demographic pattern of the new nation.

The percentage of Malay population dropped dramatically to almost half in independent Malaya.

Later, the Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*) was to follow suit.

It became *Bahasa Malaysia*, the national language, as constitutionally agreed, only to find that not all Malaysian nationals are fluent in this language even after 48 years of *Merdeka*.

I am reminded of a recent visit to the Oxford University Bodleian Library when the librarian, an Englishman, remarked in eloquent *Bahasa Malaysia*: "*Tidak semua pelajar Malaysia di sini pandai cakap Melayu* (which I took to mean *Bahasa Malaysia*)."

And he seemed to be referring to the cream from among us studying in the prestigious university. Interestingly enough, the librarian said that he learnt his *Bahasa* in a matter of months.

Be that as it may, in the nation's interest, *Bahasa Melayu* was replaced by *Bahasa Malaysia* based on the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*.

But this is not all. It is also in the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* that *sekolah Melayu* — the products of which are fondly remembered as the precursors to independent Malaya — gave way to *sekolah kebangsaan*.

It could easily have been a *kongsi* (the place) for Malaysians to build, at a tender age, the mutual trust and bond that so epitomised the emergence of this country. But this was not to be.

Ironically, with the disappearance of *sekolah Melayu*, other vernacular schools, seemed to gather strength.

Succinctly, few could match how the Malay community senses what the two concepts meant to them, and more so acted on it with all their hearts.

To top it all, every Prime Minister of Malaysia is first of all the leader of all Malaysians — not only the Malays.

The present Prime Minister has made this abundantly clear on numerous occasions — a sign that the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* is very much alive and relevant.

While it is understandable that not many communities would allow the identity of the ethnic profile be substituted, less still changed for another even in the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* agreed upon no more than 50 years ago, the Malay community had no qualms in doing just that.

Unfortunately, somehow this is not contagious enough. Some prefer the narrow view of *perkongsian*, less *bertolak ansur*.

In fact, at times, one could sense that this noble spirit has on occasion lost its lustre, if not its meaning over time.

In turn, it got adulterated and stigmatised as a "Ali Baba" operation, especially when it came to the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* of economic wealth.

Clearly the Ali Baba version is not considered as a win-win venture, at least not in the long run.

An "Ali Baba" Malaysia is certainly not what the forefathers of independent Malaya/Malaysia had in mind when they continued to promote the notion of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*.

So as we celebrate the 48th year of *Merdeka* (read: celebrating the pristine spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*) it is most appropriate for all of us to revisit the noble spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*.

One important question to ask is: Have we missed out on something so dear to our forefathers when they collectively struggled for independence from the colonial yoke? If so, what is it?

How can it be infused back into the Malaysian community, especially among the post-independent generations who do not appreciate, less still, understand what is meant (or experienced) by *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* par excellence, except in a very superficial way?

Or, is it easier to relegate it to the "dustbin of yester-year" and regard it as a burden in nation-building?

Or, as we try to understand the "sacrifices" of the younger generation of Malaysians, should that of the older generation, based on *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*, now be considered as worthless history?

Or, alternately, should it not be the role of the older, hopefully mature, generation of Malaysians to explain to the younger ones the context of the "social contract" of the 1950s in the light of the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* so that it touches their hearts as Malaysians?

Rather, should it not be reiterated that the formula of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* remains relevant to multi-dimensional Malaysia, if not as something that we can offer the world as a proven workable solution?

Hence, should we not instead sharpen the scope of *perkongsian* beyond what we know and have previously experienced?

For example, extending it into the overarching philosophy of Wawasan 2020 of a more equitable and just society would be a clear outcome of the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*.

Are not all these useful to ponder as we collectively crystallise the proposed New National Agenda where the spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian* could be pushed to a new level of genuine independence by enhancing our sense of interdependence and interdependability.

This will go a long way in meeting the mounting challenges of the 21st century of a diverse and globalised world.

In the true spirit of *bertolak ansur* and *perkongsian*, may good sense prevail as we pride ourselves as Malaysians, as much as our founding fathers would have.

To all readers, **Selamat Menyambut Hari Merdeka**, or perhaps more appropriately *Kongsi Merdeka*!

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