

OPINION

RUKUN NEGARA

ENSURING PEACE AND UNITY



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Media organisations and content creators must ensure the information they pass on is fair, the truth and not biased

DO you know the Rukun Negara by heart? I vividly remember chanting it, every Monday morning during school assemblies. The diligent recitation for 11 years has etched the five principles in my memory.

The Rukun Negara consists of five basic principles which are supposed to be upheld by all Malaysians. The principles were developed in such a way that they cut across ethnic boundaries and could be identified by all Malaysians regardless of racial background. The introduction of Rukun Negara was a strategic move by the government to inculcate the feeling of togetherness and ensure racial unity.

In essence, Malaysia is a trouble-free country where various ethnicities live peacefully among each other. However, if you look back at history, there were the May 13, 1969 and 2001 Kampung Medan racial riots. These tragedies may be due to the lack of understanding of the different cultures practiced by the different races. As noted by renowned sociologist, Syed Hussin Alatas, there is a social distance between the various races and "most Malays do not know Chinese values very well and most Chinese are ignorant of Malay values, despite the fact that they have been living side by side for so long".

Given the circumstances, it does seem like a daunting task to promote unity, especially as society was racially segregated and categorised when the British empire spread its influence in Tanah Melayu. So, what can be done to foster a better understanding between the races? In light of this, Rukun Negara is seen as a pivotal tool which could be utilised to promote cohesiveness between



The principles of Rukun Negara have enabled Malaysians to live peacefully and harmoniously. NST PIC

the various ethnicities in Malaysia.

Since the implementation and introduction of Rukun Negara, the mass media has been asked to introduce and promote the principles to the public. In the 70s, the Information Ministry announced that "dramas, music, dances etc, aired on television must reflect and enlarge the awareness of the aspiration and development of the nation in terms of unity and democracy, and a just society, etc, as envisaged in the Rukun Negara".

Television stations were also encouraged to broadcast programmes which portrayed harmonious race relations, belief in God and loyalty to the nation. In an effort to promote national unification, efforts to include all racial groups in locally produced programmes could be seen. For instance, we could see a steady increase of Malay dramas and films which featured non-Malay actors, such as *Mandatori*, *Gerak Khas* and *Seper*. In view of this, the media can be likened to an engine which ignites sparks of unity in a multicultural society.

Sadly, however, the media can also be likened to a weapon of

mass destruction, if not properly utilised. For instance, stereotypes on gender and ethnicities in the media may influence audiences' perception and create a negative impression of certain issues or culture.

I remember interviewing Malay students in Hulu Selangor, and enquired about their perception of Chinese and Indians. The first thing that they could think of when I asked them to describe what they knew about Chinese and Indians were: Ah Long, DVD peddlers and gangsters. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that they live in a largely Malay community and as a result, did not have the opportunity to earnestly socialise with other ethnicities. Thus, the thoughts they formed on other cultures were loosely based on the little they have been exposed to in the media.

What is equally worrying is that technology has enabled anyone and everyone to be content creators. It is easy for one to create their own show and broadcast it via YouTube, or publish an online newspaper riddled with biasness and untruths. This will make it more difficult for audiences to

determine and decide what and who to believe. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why we see unverified information spreading like wildfire on social media.

It goes without saying that being media literate is very important in this day and age. It ensures that one is more critical and discerning when engaged with the media. However, this responsibility shouldn't simply rest on the audience's shoulder. In my opinion, media organisations and content creators should also be accountable for the information they disseminate, by ensuring that it is not biased, the truth and fair.

Ultimately, it boils down to the collective wisdom of society. As aptly cited in our Rukun Negara – *Kesopanan dan Kesusilaan* (Good behaviour and morality) – good conduct, integrity, ethics and honesty are important values Malaysians should uphold to ensure peace and unity.

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