



## **LETTER | The unfinished business of Merdeka**

Thulasy Suppiah

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**LETTER** | As we mark 69 years of independence, Merdeka must be understood not merely as a historical milestone from 1957, but as an ongoing, living project.

While we have long secured our political sovereignty, our journey toward true social and economic independence remains unfinished.

This divide is starkly visible in our daily lives. In digital spaces, public debates too often devolve into categorising citizens by race, casually reducing individuals to a "Type."

This digital tribalism proves that the colonial legacy of "divide and rule" has simply mutated, finding new life in algorithms, anonymity, and manufactured outrage.

Recent investigations and data paint a deeply concerning picture of these fractures across three critical areas:

In employment, a study by the Centre for Governance and Political Studies (Cent-GPS) demonstrated that job applicants face drastically skewed callback rates based on ethnicity despite having identical qualifications.

In housing, research by Architects of Diversity (AOD) revealed that nearly half of Klang Valley rental listings impose racial criteria, forcing marginalised tenants to pay a "discrimination tax" in higher rents just to secure a home.

In our digital discourse, an undercover investigation by media platform *The Fourth* exposed how social hostility is often not organic, but manufactured. Irresponsible parties fund hidden agencies, cybertroopers, and comment seeders to artificially amplify polarising talking points, creating a false illusion of widespread communal division.

These practices persist due to a glaring legislative and regulatory vacuum. We have a crucial window of opportunity to begin addressing these structural flaws.

### **Addressing flaws**

In housing, as the government finalises the Residential Tenancy Bill, it is imperative that lawmakers include explicit anti-discrimination clauses.

Enacting tenancy reform without addressing racial screening merely treats the symptoms of an unfair market while ignoring its root cause. We cannot claim to legislate fairness if we leave legal loopholes for unjust exclusion.

In employment, private corporations must move beyond performative diversity statements and institutionalise objective

hiring safeguards, such as blind recruitment processes that evaluate candidates solely on professional merits before personal demographics are revealed.

In our digital sphere, regulatory frameworks must evolve to demand strict transparency for funded online campaigns, ensuring the public knows when shadowy actors have artificially manufactured social media discourse.

Yet, there is profound reason for optimism. Divisive rhetoric is steadily losing its grip on the younger demographic.

Young Malaysians - born into a hyper-connected world - are increasingly recognising that the shared struggles of stagnant wages, housing affordability, and economic uncertainty do not discriminate by race, looking past the manufactured narratives designed to compartmentalise them.

Away from the political arena and the extremes of social media, the authentic Malaysian experience has always been defined by profound warmth, shared spaces, and the quiet solidarity we show one another during national crises.

As we look toward our seventh decade as an independent nation, true Merdeka requires us to bridge the gap between the unity we live by and the fairness we legislate.

Only by actively rejecting the practices that fracture us can we move a step closer to fulfilling the true promise of Merdeka.

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