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Author	Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Chairman, ASLI Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS)

In 2020, let's establish the Harmony Act

I WISH to commend my friend, Emeritus Prof Shad Saleem Faruqi, for his excellent article in *The Star* yesterday titled "Build bridges and dismantle walls" (in the column *Reflecting on the Law*; online at bit.ly/star_bridges).

His article is most timely at the beginning of a new decade and should be taken seriously by all Malaysians if we are to move forward with peace and progress.

Shad has the intellectual depth, academic integrity and the necessary background to categorically reject religious bigotry and racism. Sadly, these issues are not often openly addressed, as Datuk Seri Wong Chun Wai wrote in his *On the Beat* column ("Silence isn't always golden", Dec 29; online at bit.ly/star_golden).

As a patriotic Malaysian Christian with moderate views – and like most Malaysians, I'm sure – I am greatly encouraged by Shad's positive comments in criticising narrow-minded guardians of religion who claim that it is haram (forbidden) for Muslims to wish "Merry Christmas" to their Christian friends and neighbours.

I have to ask: What have some of our so-called religious guardians come to? What peace and national unity are they preaching, when Islam, as I understand it, is a religion of peace, harmony and goodwill to all peoples? Why should anyone from any religion who preaches hate be tolerated? He should be hauled up and punished

if we want a happy Malaysia. We should all be true to our different – but often similar – religious teachings while isolating and rejecting the growing bigotry and rising racism to protect the well-being and success of our children's future.

Indeed, the world is watching us! Tourists will be reluctant to visit countries that tolerate hate and practise selectivity in the administration of the rule of law. Visit Malaysia 2020 will lose its attraction if we have more hate speech, especially from religious leaders.

And foreign investors, already wary thanks to Islamophobia and its implications, will hesitate to invest in Malaysia, as other more tolerant societies will be more welcoming to them.

One of Shad's quotes from the Holy Quran is, "So, compete with each other in doing good". But what goodness are religious leaders doing when they promote hate and strife?

As Shad also points out, our highly respected Council of Rulers, as the heads of Islam, can pull up those who preach and practise hatred that is based on religion and race. Similarly, the Federal Government and all its relevant agencies should adopt a national harmony policy, as Shad suggests.

In fact, I was a member of the last National Unity Council that strongly proposed a National Harmony Act but nothing came of it. Our firm recommendations to the previous government were

ignored. We thus concluded that national unity was only being paid lip service by the government of the day then.

Can this new government, in this new decade, give top priority to establishing this Harmony Act, to stamp out hate and to promote love and national unity? It need not take long to introduce this popular legislation unless extremist elements with narrow and vested interests are allowed to have their way over the bigger national interest. If that is the case, we the rakyat should resist all unMalaysian policies and practices, and do so consistently and always.

Happy new year, and may the new decade be filled with love and peace, not hate!

TAN SRI RAMON
NAVARATNAM

Chairman Asli Centre of
Public Policy Studies



EMAIL editor@thestar.com.my

MAIL The Editor,
Menara Star, 15,
Jalan 16/11, Section 16,
46350 Petaling Jaya.

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RS

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