

Reviewing the signs of the times

The rules have been there since 1982, stop painting enforcement with a racial brush.

THE last thing that Kuala Lumpur mayor Datuk Seri Dr Maimunah Mohd Sharif would expect is to be called a racist. After all, she is married to a Chinese and her children studied in Chinese schools.

The Datuk Bandar, who reported for work in August, has found herself caught in a storm over the signboard controversy.

Most media reports, and more so social media posts, have embellished the issue of a so-called crackdown by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) over business premises that failed to use Bahasa Malaysia (BM) or downplayed the national language on signboards.

The blow-up has caught Maimunah, once the Seberang Perai Municipal Council president, by surprise as the order did not come from her.

The reality is that it is an ongoing exercise as the requirement has been in existence since 1982 under a by-law on advertisements in Kuala Lumpur. It's not a crackdown.

It is clear that other languages beside the national language are allowed on signage, but BM must take precedence.

The issue was further clouded when politicians came into play with defensive rebuttals that had racist one-liners.

Certainly, it could be better discussed with rational points, but a simple issue of signboards has generated into a national conversation with toxic, racial undertones.

For a start, let's look at the facts. DBKL has issued licences for more than 120,000 business premises in Kuala Lumpur and over 19,000 signboards.

And between January and November this year, only 55 notices

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Comment

es have been issued for violation of signboard rules.

Out of these, 24 of the affected premises have agreed to make the necessary changes required. These offenders were those that did not use a single Malay word or had none at all.

It came as no surprise to many of us. They included 11 restaurants and premises that used only Chinese words, which were mostly the hotpot restaurants along Jalan Imbi in Kuala Lumpur.

Other shops involved those owned by Bangladesh and Myanmar nationals, who also disregarded the national language.

These were found along Jalan Bukit Bintang, Jalan Pudu, Jalan Tun Tan Siew Sin and other areas in the city. One premise in Bukit Bintang, run by an Arab, was asked to take down his all-Arabic signboard.

The task of checking these signboards comes under the jurisdiction of the enforcement and security unit, which is their routine.

Amid the confusion, one question came to mind: If the DBKL had been selective in its action, why are some premises spared despite displaying more prominent names or brands in English instead of BM?

DBKL has explained that if a

firm, association or company, as registered under the Registration of Businesses Act, Companies Act or Societies Act, consist of or includes words that are not in the national language, then there is no requirement to translate those terms to the national language.

In short, DBKL would not insist on a BM translation of Starbucks or KFC, as these are registered brands, or The Loaf, once owned by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

How would one translate Zus Coffee, a brand, or The Loaf, into BM anyway?

But it is not difficult to put a "Restoran Hot Pot" on the signboard and there is no need to argue over whether these premises only cater to Chinese tourists, because other languages are allowed.

If we go by the logic that only Chinese has to be used for business reasons, then the Myanmar, Bangladesh and Arab nationals would use the same argument that they don't need to use BM.

It can be tricky when inaccurate or inappropriate Malay versions are used, sometimes, as Malaysiakini writer Zikri Kamarulzan asked in his article "Guna Bahasa Melayu atau tidak, peniaga kafir sentiasa salah" (Whether they use Malay or not, infidel traders are always wrong) published on Monday.

"Is it important for Malays to know that the Chinese writing on the sign of a shop means 'Pau Babi Ah Chong'?" he noted.

He said in 2021, a local company that produced an alcohol product bearing the name "Timah" provoked the anger of some people on the grounds that the company did not respect the sensitivities of "our people".

"Meanwhile, a fast-food chain changed the name of root beer to just RB to protect the sensitivity of the Malays," Zikri wrote.

Well, common sense has essentially remained. My Ramly Burger man understands when I ask for a hot dog, and he is not offended by it.

Dr Mahathir once walked into a mall, spotted a few premises using Chinese characters and got all worked up, saying: "I felt I was in China."

As expected, his comments were widely reported in China and Hong Kong.

Maybe he should take a walk along Bukit Bintang and realise that it now looks like "I am now in an Arab country", though none of us have complained about it because from a positive aspect, they cater to the Arab tourists.

This is a free country and if Arab nationals can afford to pay the high rentals for these premises, go ahead.

The point here is that as Malaysians, and not just Malays, we would want these restaurants and premises to have Malay and English words, as well as Arabic for their customers too.

Likewise, not all of us, even though we are ethnic Chinese, understand Chinese or speak Mandarin.

I would want my menu to be in English, for example, if I am at a Chinese restaurant in Jalan Imbi.

In any case, local Muslim customers come in bigger numbers than Chinese tourists, which is why many restaurants have turned halal, or at least pork-free, and using BM or English would always help.

Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Tiong King

Sing is understandably defensive as he is responsible for bringing in Chinese tourists, who are affluent and known for their spending power.

He said DBKL's enforcement has resulted in "emotional reactions" and crossed "unnecessary boundaries".

The Sarawak politician is worried that a negative perception of Malaysia would affect the country's reputation among tourists, especially in view of Visit Malaysia Year 2026.

Admittedly, many airports overseas now use Chinese in their announcements, while Thailand even has a special lane at the immigration clearance for China tourists.

Luxury shops like Louis Vuitton have hired Chinese-speaking assistants in London and Paris to please Chinese tourists.

But Harrods as a brand remains big on its signboard. There is no Chinese, not even in smaller characters. That has not stopped Chinese tourists from flocking there.

Really, our politicians need to argue our case better. It is most unfortunate that the "under siege" mentality continues to prevail among us, regardless of our race, and the tendency is to take up a racial position.

Bahasa Malaysia is our national language. Period. The by-laws say all other languages are allowed. Almost all our restaurants and premises comply with it, and in many cases, English takes precedence. Look around.

Finally, the hypocrisy of politicians – all-Chinese or all-Tamil signboards and banners are allowed during election campaigns in their constituencies.