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THERE seems little to look forward to, having just come out of 2009, which ended with [religious tension](#)

that's spilling over into the New Year. All over what to call [God](#)

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The dispute over "[Allah](#)" dates back to the 1980s. But last year, it was just one event in a string of others on the erosion of [freedom of religion](#), [constitutional law](#) and [mutual respect](#)

. Such events seem to have been hallmarks of 2009.

On the eve of the New Year, and for the first time, my husband and I broached the question: What would be the breaking point for us to decide to [leave the country](#)? Prior to this, we had asked ourselves: Would we ever leave Malaysia? And the answer had always been "no".

Initially, I had thought of throwing out this question to readers for their response: "What would be the breaking point to leave the country?" I had the idea that if enough people put their breaking points down in writing, then hopefully the prime minister or the good people in government would read them and be concerned enough to prevent such situations from happening.

On the other hand, to entertain such a question would be like conceding defeat. It would be like giving in to my fears, which is exactly what the bigots want me to feel.

Fighting fear

It takes restraint and level-headedness to fight off fears caused by growing intolerance and close-mindedness. Not just by gallery-playing politicians or overzealous [pressure groups](#), but by those we think are "average and moderate Malaysians".

Just trawl the internet for blog postings and comments on the [High Court](#) 's judgement allowing "Allah" to be used by non-Muslims. Or look at the discussion on the over-93,000-member (as of 6 Jan 2010) [Facebooko](#)

[ok](#)

group formed to protest the ruling. It is absolutely their right to protest, but it's an eye-opener to see some Muslim friends I thought more open-minded and internationally educated among the group's members.

But it is the New Year now, and I must attempt to be positive. I am sure there will be plenty more occasions for the rest of this year to respond to the bigoted columnists of a certain newspaper, insular politicians, and types like hecklers who disrupt [town hall meetings](#) .

Things *can* get better, but only if those who are afraid face their fears. And this is all of us, whichever side of the "Allah" debate we are on. Can we face the fear of having cherished ideals and beliefs debated? Can we face the fear of being a minority? Can the majority face the fear of being equal with the minority? Can we together agree to disagree? Can we do all this with mutual respect?

Why stay?

So, instead of asking what is your breaking point that would make you leave, I reverse the question: What keeps you in Malaysia? And don't say it's because this is your home. Tell me something different. Maybe if enough people put these positive reasons down in writing, then hopefully the good people in government, or even those gallery-playing politicians, will read them and see what is worth doing.

Naïve? Never mind. There's been too much negativity already. Change starts with us, anyway. *We* are the gallery politicians play to.

So, what keeps me in Malaysia?

First, the potential and flexibility of the people. The potential to accept differences with maturity and mutual respect. We once had it in previous generations, my elders tell me. It just needs to be rediscovered and nurtured.

Secondly, the growing voice of civil society. More people are less afraid of speaking up now, and despite continuing restrictions, they have found alternative channels of expression. The more people speak up, the more their leaders will have to listen to them. The greater challenge, however, is for more Malaysians to learn to debate using facts and not emotion.

Thirdly, the racial and religious diversity among my friends. I want to preserve these friendships, which are enriching and unique. Even if these friends are on the opposite side of a race or religion debate.

Malaysia clearly hasn't reached its destination, nor does it seem clear on where it's headed socially. The possibility of what we *could* be is really all that is keeping me hopeful. Am I chasing the wind? But if not for hope, what other way is there to start a new year? There's no choice, really. It's either hope or despair .

So I will choose to be hopeful. Happy New Year, and here's to keeping that hope alive throughout 2010.