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From Reformasi to violence

Abdul Razak Ahmad

6.20pm - The stage is set, the 200-odd players in position. They begin chanting: "Reformasi! Undur Mahathir Undur!". Banners and posters demand the immediate unconditional release of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the resignation of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for a litany of sins printed in black, white and various shades of red. Everywhere, there are banners and posters of Anwar. It's almost as if the crowd is expecting him here.

6.51pm - The muezzin calls for prayers to begin. Some of the Press members wait at a nearby restaurant for the crowd to complete solat Maghrib. The foreign media is here in numbers rarely seen. Many are newcomers, sporting APEC Press tags. None of the local Press are wearing tags. We have been warned against it, for fear of being identified and attacked by the crowd.

7.38pm - Prayers are over. The crowd moves back into position, so too the Press. The crowd flocks to foreign camera crews, with some "organisers" posing members of the crowd for the benefit of these crews and photographers. The organisers are helpful to the foreign Press; giving pointers, directions and answering questions. Because they move seamlessly in and out of the crowd, it is impossible to determine who the leaders are. The demonstration is definitely well organised. But by whom?

7.40 pm - The crowd has swelled to about a thousand, and is exclusively Malay. Women are well represented, easily making up a quarter of the crowd. There are several children in the company of their parents. There are students, too. They are here, being photographed and filmed openly. Won't this allow the police to trace their identities? How many of us would openly show ourselves here?

7.50 pm - A mosque official makes a plea to the crowd to move out of the mosque compound, but his voice is drowned out by the slogan chanting, which is building up in intensity. When interviewed by a foreign journalist, a man named Ali said: "We want Dr Mahathir to step down. We want Anwar to be freed. We want elections, so that we can choose new leaders." Their objectives are clear, never mind how they can be carried out. But his feelings are echoed by everyone present. They are dissatisfied, and feel that change must come. They claim demonstrations are the only avenue open to them.

8.04pm - An elderly man dressed in a batik shirt with an Anwar button pinned on, who was directing traffic, is asked why he is here. His reply: "I do all this work this evening, I feel tired, but my heart is joyful. I am old, 70 years already. All this is not for me, I'll soon be dead. It's for my children."

The crowd is becoming agitated by the presence of plainclothes policemen and the local Press. I am asked thrice by unknown persons to explain why I am here. I tell them that I am with the foreign Press, whom I have been sticking close to. They are satisfied. They tell me they don't want any local reporters to give a distorted view of the event. The foreign media, they say, is fair. The crowd is easily 2,000-strong by now. The air is thick with anticipation.

9.10pm - The crowd is very worked up after Isyak prayers. Gunshots are heard. The crowd begins to run in different directions, and a commotion ensues. Several plainclothes policemen suspected of masquerading as photographers are harassed. They panic and pull out guns. They fire

warning shots and barely manage to escape the crowd which begins to beat and stone them. The news quickly spreads among the crowd, but there are too many wildly differing versions to know which is the truth. The Reuters camera crew, among others, manages to get it on tape.

9.29 pm - The crowd is getting agitated. Their spotters report that the Federal Reserve Unit is still waiting at Dataran Merdeka. Why haven't they come in? The crowd jeers at the departing policemen. They seem determined to take this illegal demonstration to its scripted climax: a well-publicised clash with police. They burn posters of Dr Mahathir, and the foreign Press captures the moment. The first news flashes are shouted through handphones to editors: "Police fire warning shots as chaos ensues in Kuala Lumpur. At the other end of the city, leaders thrash out an agreement on free trade".

11.20 pm - News spreads that the FRU is finally moving in. A section of the crowd has already marched along Jalan Raja Abdullah, heading towards Jalan Sultan Ismail intent on getting to the Renaissance Hotel, where US Secretary of State Madeline Albright is staying. They reportedly encounter traffic police at the junction of Jalan Raja Abdullah and Jalan Sultan Ismail. They thrash and set fire to motorcycles belonging to policemen which are parked to block access to Jln Raja Abdullah.

11.24pm - We move to Jalan Sultan Ismail, just as the FRU marches in. The crowd has dispersed by the time they arrive. Perhaps they have achieved their objective for the night: coverage from the world's Press, including live feed from the likes of CNN's Mike Chinoy. From their generous coverage, it will look as though all Kuala Lumpur is ablaze with dissent tonight, no matter that many are oblivious, partying in nightspots a mere half a kilometre away.

12.05am - An elderly Chinese man approaches me, his head shaking in disbelief. I ask him how he found out about the demonstration. "KL ni bukan besar sangat." I ask him what he wanted: "Elections. PM must be replaced. He is cruel and inhumane for treating his former deputy the way he did. I was shocked at Anwar's black eye. It's very bad," he said. The 70-year-old from Bandar Baru Sentul then walks away slowly, just as the FRU return to their trucks. They do not bother to shoo him away. He was the only non-Malay member of the public I encountered that night.

12.10pm - I remember one of the angry crowd saying during an interview earlier: "We will constantly demonstrate to get our message across. We will continuously demonstrate until our demands are met." Soon after, I meet Brendan, a fellow journalist. The last we met was in June, at the luxurious residence of a prominent politician. The occasion was an informal Press conference, a few days after former Umno Youth head Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi first made calls for Reformasi. We wanted to find out what Reformasi meant, but the politician skilfully evaded our questions. Tonight, with rubbish strewn everywhere, FRU lorries by the roadside and a continuously low-circling helicopter overhead, those questions are finally being answered.

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