

Ex-detainee: Young people now acting without fear
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by Keruah Usit

Professor Tan Ka Kheng, a distinguished chemical and environmental engineer, was the first person to be imprisoned without trial during Mahathir's 'Operation Lalang' mass arrests under the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 1987. He was not the last - a total of 106 prisoners of conscience were locked up in Kamunting, Perak.

azlanTan was arrested for supporting protests against the radioactive waste dump at the Papan and Bukit Merah Asian Rare Earth (ARE) project in Perak, and the construction of Bakun Dam in the 1980s.

Though scarred by solitary confinement and the ISA imprisonment, Tan remains an environmental activist to this day. He is using his experience fighting ARE and Bakun to advise the anti-Lynas Rare Earth plant campaign, a lively and creative grassroots movement in Pahang.

In a frank conversation with Malaysiakini, Tan described how young people the world over have been influenced by people's revolutions in the Arab Spring, and how old weapons of social control in Malaysia, like the ISA, have lost ground.

"People have this new confidence to go out and protest. The Malaysian government talks about riots and so on - who wants to riot? We all just want to go and voice our concerns. Who caused the problems at the Bersih 2.0 rally (on July 9) and Himpunan Hijau (on Oct 9)? Only the Federal Reserve Unit (police)," he argued.

"If you talk to the young Kuantan people protesting against Lynas, or a lot of the young people I met at Bersih, you sense they feel empowered. They can act without fear, even though intimidation is always there. They feel very strongly about their rights.

"I think it's a world phenomenon, (as shown by) the Arab Spring. These revolutions began by gathering people together using sms and YouTube. That's why the Chinese government is so frightened of social media," he said.

Multiracial protests - a turning point

Bersih 2.0 was a watershed in Malaysia's history, bringing together protesters from all racial groups to pursue a shared goal of cleaning up Malaysia's badly flawed electoral process.

bersih rally july 9 crowd face-off with police 1"Bersih 2.0 was interesting. I was in the Chinatown section of the rally. We came down from the Pasar Seni LRT station, and immediately we could see our Malay friends coming out from the masjid, and Indian groups, and various other groups," he recalled.

"It was really big. Many Malay friends felt very happy this time (compared to the first Bersih rally), because of the very huge participation by the Chinese community, and especially by the young - and rightly so, because the young generation of Malaysians are the ones who have suffered most under the New Economic Policy, and the abuse and bullying by the ruling regime."

Tan praised the solid participation and leadership of Malay grassroots activists in recent human rights protests.

"In Kamunting in the 1970s, almost all the (ISA) detainees were Chinese. But after the 1980s, nearly all the detainees have been Malays, all the opposition leaders. The ruling party was just picking them off.

"Now, for instance, in the anti-ISA demonstrations, I remember two years ago, when I went, 95 percent of the protesters were Malays. They were so well-organised, and they had their own marshals. This is

fascinating, it is a new phase (in political protest).”

Tan rejected the clumsy comparisons made by cabinet ministers and senior police officers of the Bersih 2.0 protest with the riots in British cities over the summer.

“The (British) people just took an attitude - I wouldn't say it's an anarchistic attitude - that they were fed up with the way the country and society is run.”

Tan highlighted the cultural dislocation of Britain's ruling classes - exemplified by Premier David Cameron, who has lived a life of privilege - with the lives of ordinary working people. Cameron blamed a 'gang culture' for the riots, although the majority of looters were not gang members.

“David Cameron thinks that everybody goes to Eton and Oxford, and everybody invites Rupert Murdoch to lunch and dinner through the back door of 10 Downing Street,” Tan said.

Were the riots caused by a 'feral' culture, as Cameron's Conservatives alleged?

“Yes,” Tan replied sarcastically, “because (the rioters') culture doesn't include lunch and dinner with media tycoons. It was like going back to the atmosphere of the Paris commune, and the French Revolution, when Parisians were going hungry, and Marie Antionette said: 'If they don't have bread, let them eat cake!’”

The contribution of the Internet

“The ruling elites forgot that the Internet has changed people. The good thing is, young people seem to have recovered their hidden, or overshadowed, conscience. Look at Singapore's example. Malaysia's political tsunami in 2008 influenced the voting pattern in Singapore (in this year's election, 47 percent voted for the opposition),” Tan noted.

“But what was the response by PAP stalwarts, in trying to pick up the pieces? (The PAP) said they must change the syllabus in school and tell (young Singaporeans) to be loyal to the PAP, teach them how to wash their backsides. The PAP thinks 'we didn't teach them properly, that's why they're not voting for us.' This is pathetic, self-serving,” he laughed.

“The ruling elites must remember it's not a case of 'my papa was PM, now it's my turn to be PM' - there's no such thing,” he went on. “These ruling elites, including (Singapore premier) Lee Hsien Loong, are quite ignorant about reality, how people feel, how people live, in small flats for example.

“But somehow all these truths will come out. You can see that happening in the Arab Spring in Cairo, Tunisia, Syria, though less so in the Libyan nonsense.

“It's a different world from 1987. The founders of the Internet were right - they could see a world of revolution, of democratisation, where information cannot be hidden any more. That's good news, I think, for young people, for the younger generation.”

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