

Why M'sians overseas joining global Bersih 3.0

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My name is Yolanda Augustin and I left Malaysia 14 years ago to study in the UK, where I now live and work as a doctor.

I'm writing to explain what inspired me to get involved in the Bersih movement and global solidarity work for Malaysia.

For many years, I felt a sense of helplessness and frustration as I followed Malaysian current affairs and saw the country I grew up in stuck in a downward spiral of poor governance and deteriorating civil liberties and human rights.

What really got to me was the complete waste of potential - Malaysia was and remains a beautiful country - rich in natural resources, great weather, fantastic cuisine and diverse culture.

It has a small population of 28 million people that could enjoy a world class healthcare and education system if the money spent on hapless vanity projects and siphoned off to fund the multimillionaire lifestyles of government ministers was spent on improving the lives of the rakyat.

I was also struck by the vast number of Malaysians I met living overseas - many of them doing interesting and inspiring things- writers, scientists, entrepreneurs, doctors, chefs, bankers, lecturers, lawyers, nurses, town planners, engineers, actors, the list goes on.

Many of them still have strong roots and a sense of connection to their place of birth.

Many of them wanting to contribute something good and positive towards Malaysia but not knowing what, where or how.

People would often ask me if I ever planned to return to Malaysia one day.

I would usually smile and say "One day...when I finish my training...but not yet."

The truth was that as much as I was often homesick and nostalgic for the country I grew up in, living abroad had changed my life and my mindset.

I appreciated the freedom to move, think and speak as I please, without a psychological straight jacket, without the risk of the 'guillotine of the Internal Security Act' (or newly rebranded Special Security Offences Bill) as Hishammudin Rais calls it continually hanging over my head, where overnight the special branch who have been following your every movement for months from a red Proton Saga can break into your home, kidnap you and tear the fabric of your life, and that of your family and friends apart.

I appreciated living in a place where archaic pieces of legislation such as the Printing Press and Publications Act didn't keep the press muzzled, making newspapers not worth the paper they were printed on, where the press kept the politicians in check, not the other way round.

I appreciated living in a place where critical thinking and debate were encouraged, where students were not arrested for peaceful protest, where freedom of speech and assembly were part and parcel of everyday life.

In my student days I had been part of a London solidarity anti-ISA campaign, sparked by the arrest and detention of those involved in the 1998 reformasi movement.

A small group of five or six of us used to picket outside the Malaysian tourism office in Trafalgar Square during our lunch hour.

It was a nice gesture but it all seemed pretty depressing- Malaysians in general seemed to be plagued by a sense of inertia and a general unease that Special Branch Big Brother would catch them (even all the way in London) if they dared tell the government to start behaving itself.

Then in 2010 I met a group of like-minded Malaysians in London, many of whom have since become great friends, and we started a series of solidarity protests again, to give support to our brothers and sisters in Malaysia who were tirelessly campaigning on various human rights issues and to form a pressure group aimed at holding the Malaysian government to account for their pitiful human rights record.

It was incredibly encouraging to see the solidarity movement grow from 10 to 20 to 50 regular attendees.

I mean- these are MALAYSIANS we are talking about- and we are generally not used to challenging authority or protesting (particularly not in freezing just above 0 degrees temperatures!).

In June 2011 we joined in the global solidarity campaign for Bersih 2.0 and it was awe-inspiring to see Malaysians from over 30 cities around the world stand in solidarity with over 50,000 fellow Malaysians in KL to support the call for free, fair and clean elections.

In London we had expected around 100 people to turn up, 150 if we were lucky.

When nearly 500 Malaysians gathered in front of the Malaysian High Commission in Belgravia we were gobsmacked.

Across five continents the global Bersih 2.0 fire had been lit and there was no stopping it.

The ridiculous antics of a panicking government- arresting over 1,500 civilians, many for as little as wearing a yellow T-shirt, the detention of six activists under the Emergency Ordinance, the tragic death of one rally supporter, the unleashing of water cannons and tear gas on peaceful demonstrators, in one instance even into the confines of a maternity hospital, failed to snuff out the unggun Bersih (flame of Bersih) as Pak Samad so aptly calls it.

It had exactly the opposite effect- merely igniting the flame further.

Peacefully, sincerely and with quiet resolve - Malaysians around the world came together, with their own small but significant acts of peaceful resistance- to remind the Malaysian government and the world that it doesn't have to be this way.

Free and fair elections are the essential building blocks of any open and mature democracy.

It is our right to demand it, and we should expect no less.

An aunt wrote to me in the aftermath of Bersih 2.0 to explain what had inspired her to join the Bersih rally in KL.

She put it simply, "July 9, 2011 will forever be etched in my mind as the day I decided to stop being afraid. My daughter was adamant about going for the Bersih rally in KL and she went in on Friday evening with friends from the Women's Aid Organisation to stay at a hotel in Bukit Bintang.

"I felt then that our generation had let our kids down and we were expecting them to move mountains by cleaning up the mess. It really was time to do something, no matter how minimal"

This Saturday April 28, 2012, Global Bersih 3.0 solidarity actions will be taking place in over 70 cities in 29 countries around the world.

We urge Malaysians the world over to take part and stand up for free and fair elections and civil liberties in Malaysia- because we CAN.

The time has come for Malaysians the world over to do something, no matter how minimal.

That time is NOW.

Salam Bersih.

To find attend a Global Bersih 3.0 solidarity sit-in near you please go to <http://www.globalbersih.org/>

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