

Voices in a BERSIH night
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I can be loyal and I can be true, but that's for somebody else and it will never be you. You think we're predetermined, but babe you're learning way to slow... - Long Time Ago (Concrete Blondes)

COMMENT It was the night before the Bersih 3.0 storm and I was wandering around Dataran Merdeka attempting to discover (like the many other demonstrations I had attended all these years before) exactly why some Malaysians felt compelled to take their concerns to the streets.

The area was filled with Khairy Jamaluddin's "anomalies". And by anomalies I mean those souls who rejected the Umno regime's divisive policies and ideologies that sought to imprison them in racial or religious cages.

dataran merdeka eve of bersih 3.0 rally 270412 7It seemed that people were not only willing to sit and protest but this night, they were also willing to talk.

And their talk, after a little hesitation, was colour- and religion-blind. Indeed, what for so long had been confined to the anonymous spaces of the Internet was unleashed on the streets of Kuala Lumpur. There was no worry of 'sensitive issues', only a desire to be understood and the recognition of fellowship borne of nervous tension and a determination to see this through.

I have been accused of being a "classical pseudo multiracialist" and in the telling of this tale I will make no attempt to mask the racial make-up of those I encountered.

It is comforting for those who champion the cause of their 'own race' to continue seeing the 'other' as the antagonist, but this night all our racial preoccupations were mixed-up and the reality that was coalescing for Malaysians that night was that what they wanted was the same even though what separated us was the regime's corrupting influence that affected us all in different ways.

Retired Malay civil servants

The first group I encountered was a regretful mélange of retired Malay senior civil servants. A former diplomat bemoaned the fact that a cigar-chomping political crony with an "alleged charge of molestation" against a waitress besmirching his reputation was posted as an ambassador to the most powerful country in the world - the same 'diplomat' who made racial slurs against Indian students before his appointment as ambassador. To think, he mused, we used to have a fairly reputable foreign service.

Or how about the cacophony that spewed vitriol against former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad for turning the civil service into a tool for the Umno regime and poisoning whatever multiracialism that existed in the service.

You would be surprised at the anger and deep frustration that this group displayed towards Umno policies like the BTN (Biro Tatanegara) and the way how it affected their children. And of course, the issue of the way Islam was being used to manipulate the civil service came up and these retirees were adamant that any new government should tackle this issue head-on if any legitimate change was to be instituted.

Tired of being made scapegoats

Being a former member of the armed forces does sometimes negatively affect friendly intentions. A group of Chinese students and their fairly older companions wearily engaged me in conversation upon discovering my military pedigree.

NONEThey told me that they were not there for any particular political party but were tired of the lies, corruption and racism that they encountered on a daily basis. They were tired of being made scapegoats for all the ills of the Malay community.

The students in this group told me that they had no desire to leave this country, which is why they were there. All they wanted was good governance and they really didn't care who was in government as long as those political parties were voted in legitimately and they governed the country without "racism", religious bigotry" and' corruption".

One fellow, growing bolder, lamented the fact that foreigners were getting citizenship and the "true natives" of this country were being sidelined.

"Uncle," he said, "See, they don't give Indians citizenship but they give Indonesians and others what is rightfully yours and they benefit from the taxes we and our parents pay." A former menteri besar of Selangor's name kept cropping up.

'Photographic evidence'

Throughout all of this I noticed an aged selendang-clad Malay woman in 'sarong kebaya' spritely taking pictures with all and sundry with young children in tow, who I later discovered were her grandchildren.

She was more than happy to talk to a retired officer of the Royal Malaysian Navy. She was a Kirkby-trained teacher who was horrified at the current education system in place.

Why are you here, I enquired. She told me that she wanted to show her grandchildren (aged nine to 14 who were merrily romping around) that their grandmother participated in an event that would have a positive affect on their future. The pictures she told me was "photographic evidence" of her efforts.

She confided in me that her own daughter had accused her of being an active participant in the deterioration of the education system in this country.

At this age she finally decided to do "something" after keeping silent for so long. This was her first demonstration and apparently she liked what she saw. Tellingly, she said this is the Malaysia I recognise from my past.

UIA students hawking 'change'

Early in the morning, the Bersih storm only a few hours away, I decided to pay homage to the Ganesha Temple, opposite the Pudu Raya bus terminal.

My trek was cut short by the animated voices of five Malay Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA) students chatting away in English as they packed Bersih merchandise after a long day of hawking "change".

Curious, I introduced myself and asked if I could ask them a few questions. They were more than happy to provide answers and had a few questions of their own.

They wanted to know why a retired naval officer and barrister was out so late and wearing a Bersih head band at that.

I informed them that I was not the only one. I told them of my 'interview' with a band of former commandoes who were making themselves comfortable for the long day of protest ahead. What angered these old warriors was the state of the armed forces.

A worthless education

Here's a shortlist of the grievances. Submarines having problems submerging. Aircraft engines disappearing. Armed vehicles stilted because of overweight guns. Naval personnel owing money to 'alongs' when rampant corruption is going in the Defence Ministry.

But what got the biggest laugh from these youngsters was the complaint by these commandoes of the slovenly and overweight military officers they see strutting around in the Defence Ministry.

Like most people around Dataran Merdeka, they did not mince their words about the Umno regime.

And neither did these UIA students who heaped scorn on their lecturers, professors and the vice-chancellors of the numerous universities in this country. They mocked those "Umno-appointed academics" who were more interested in morality (even though they were lacking) than any educational endeavours.

They held individuals like Dr Azmi Shahrom, Dr M Bakri Musa, Dr Azly Rahman, Dr Jomo Sundaram, Dr Abdul Aziz Bari and Dr Lim Teik Ghee, to name a few, in high esteem and lamented the fact that their education was practically worthless outside of Malaysia.

To be honest, I reminded that it probably wasn't worth that much in Malaysia too, except in government departments and GLCs (government-linked companies). They concurred and hoped their presence here helped changed these unfortunate circumstances.

Not just about free and fair polls

By no means are these voices indicative of a general trend in Malaysian politics. I make no such claims. These are but snippets of conversations going on that are rarely acknowledged except on the Internet.

But this night for those Malaysians, who for whatever reasons ventured out of their comfort zones, it was an opportunity to speak freely without fear with other like-minded individuals without the safety of anonymity, which is what this regime fears the most.

These people are patriots who love this country but have lost faith in the government of the day.

This was not only about free and fair elections. For some, this was about reforming government. For others, it was about repairing our education system. Or demanding that ignorance not be a value transmitted by the regime.

There was no 1Malaysia, there were many, and before the coming storm, we all took shelter in one another's company.

