

**'Bersih! Merdeka! Merdeka Bersih!'**  
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The following remarks were delivered at a Global Bersih event in Sydney, Australia on Saturday 28 April.

I speak today, here in Australia, as an Australian citizen.

I speak about citizenship, Australian citizenship and also Malaysian citizenship.

Australia and Malaysia are not two entirely different worlds.

Far from it.

Both countries are constitutional monarchies - Malaysia because of the constitutional role of the Agong, who is chosen from among the nine Malay state rulers, and Australia because, chosen or not, the Queen of England is also somehow the Queen of Australia.

Both countries are constitutional monarchies in technical form.

But in real political substance and character both are parliamentary democracies.

What this means is that the government "emerges from the majority on the floor of the house" - a majority that in principle represents the will of the majority of the nation's citizens.

How is the membership of "the people's house" chosen? How are the people's representatives identified?

By means of a national democratic election.

So elections are indispensable and fundamental to representative parliamentary democracy.

Not just because, through this device, governments emerge and are installed.

But, more basically and importantly, because it is by means of national elections that the government, the regime it heads and the entire political order at whose apex the government stands are morally empowered, "made legitimate".

In this way, and by no other means, our governments are given that special kind of "secular democratic sanctity" that endows modern governments and states with moral authority.

A compelling authority that obliges all citizens to heed their decisions, and so makes government authoritative and effective.

Popular will disfigured

For this most basic reason, election processes must be fair and clean, not distorted or manipulated exercises.

If they are distorted, if they are subject to cynical manipulation, then they are exercises in "mis-representation".

They misrepresent the popular will of the nation's citizens by falsely selecting the people's

representatives.

They and all that they deliver are, in other words, simply bogus.

When such exercises yield their maimed and misleading results, when the polls deliver "doctored" figures, it is not only the popular will that is disfigured.

No less, government legitimacy, authority and all real prospects of government effectiveness are crippled and doomed.

That is why governments, no less than citizens, need a good, meaning "clean and fair", election system.

They simply "don't have a hope" without one.

Just as sin does not give birth to virtue, so tainted and illegitimate electoral mechanisms cannot produce legitimate government.

Clean and proper elections, the very best that can be achieved in a messy and imperfect world, are necessary in any modern democracy.

They are the foundation of government itself.

It is as simple as that.

One more thing. This fact holds true everywhere.

Credible elections are everywhere the basis of plausible and effective democratic government.

No compromising on integrity

It is no less true - clean elections cannot be less, but are only more, necessary - in Malaysia: A country where there is incessant pre-election speculation and manoeuvring, a perpetual, never-ceasing election campaign.

Where the only remaining public political issue that is officially recognised as being of any legitimate interest to citizens is the question "when will the next election be held?"

And where election speculation goes on for years, yet every election is in the end a furtively rushed "snap" election, as easily missed as an English summer when you go to the cinema on the wrong afternoon!

Where incessant election speculation, and ceaseless, cynical manipulation of interest in that question have entirely consumed, displaced and replaced - where they have devoured and cannibalized - all other public political concerns, and when the only remaining political question that people are really asked and urged to contemplate is the timing of the next election, there can be no compromising on the integrity of the election system and its processes.

Where, for most citizens, there is little more to national politics than the occasional election, there must be little that wrong - only the absolutely unavoidable minimum - with those elections.

As a government and ruling party, you cannot call upon people to focus upon - to be convinced, to be democratically inspired and uplifted by - a shambles, a farcical mess, a parody of propriety, a cesspool.

Where elections figure so largely in political life as they do in Malaysia, where they dominate the popular public political imagination, elections - the electoral system, its routines and processes - cannot be anything less than unquestionable, "squeaky clean", bersih.

The matter is as simple as that.

Hence the popular demand: "Bersih!" "Merdeka!" "Merdeka Bersih!"

To its creators Merdeka was never a project to found a political order of dubious legitimacy.

Those whose actions suggest otherwise dishonour Malaysia and its history.

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