

The Dataran of stolen dreams
MalaysiaKini.com
April 30, 2012
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If the machine of government is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law - Henry David Thoreau

COMMENT At the end of the day, we lost the moral high ground adding fuel to the lies of the regime. It comes as no surprise to me. When you have a crowd of (maybe) hundreds of thousands, something "unusual" was bound to happen.

But let me tell you what this regime fears the most. It does fear violence as witnessed by the treatment meted out towards the protesters. It fears who the violence was directed against.

The ghosts of May 1969 have been truly exorcised. Malaysians are not turning against one another. That bogeyman that pro-regime types including the state propaganda organs have used for years has been destroyed.

NONE 'They' are turning against the organs of the state attempting in their over-exuberance to reclaim something which rightly belongs to us.

I greeted the first light of April 28 in the Ganesha temple with prayers and a conversation with an Indian police officer who was there for the same reason as everyone else - illumination.

The temple folk had told me of an 'important' police officer who frequented the temple and I sought him out, being at ease with the security personnel of this regime having been one for the better part of my life.

He asked me if I was part of this 'event'. I answered in the affirmative and the conversation moved on to the behaviour of the police which had been exemplary the night before and my concerns that it would remain that way.

I made it clear that I thought the regime was overreacting and my scorn for the duplicitous nature of how they handled the Bersih movement. He agreed with me which came as no surprise and told me that many of 'them' felt the same way but their duty to higher powers often conflicted with their own personal beliefs.

Mixing with cheerful protesters

As I walked back to the hotel I was supposed to spend the night in, I pondered about what the Special Branch officer said about 'his duties'.

It's very difficult trying to explain this concept to 'civilians' and I have resigned myself to the fact that this will always be a barrier between those who have served professionally and those who have not been encumbered by the obligations owed to the state and your fellow brothers and sisters who enforce state policy.

NONEThe short story is, not everyone is a running dog of the establishment even though there's plenty of evidence to make that case.

Conscientious objecting works well in theory but the reality is a minefield of personal ethics and professional obligations easily subverted by emotional grandstanding.

Make no mistake, I strongly object to the way how the protesters broke not only the law (see above

quote) but more importantly the compact between members of the public who participated in the protest and members of the Bersih steering committee (and their political party sympathisers), but I am appalled at the way how the PDRM acted in such an unprofessional manner in their treatment of those protesters unlucky enough to be in their way.

Professionalism especially in this context is how you (the police) react under stressful situations.

The abuse meted out to the public/protesters is merely a reflection of the regime's attitude towards those who dissent personified by the conscience of Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, who has no problem sitting with seditious cow-head protesters or bemoaning for the loss of life of wanted terrorists like Nordin Mat Top.

NONEIf anyone in the Anwar Ibrahim camp encouraged the protesters into some sort of 'reclaiming' the Dataran Merdeka, it was irresponsible of them to have done so, but when we have Prime Minister Najib Razak declaring that Umno supporters should defend Putrajaya with their dead bodies, I find it very difficult to get angry with protesters attempting to reclaim what is theirs by right despite agreeing not to.

The fact that any time anyone shouted 'Reformasi', it was met with chants of 'Bersih' should have clued Anwar in on the fact that this was bigger than him.

I reconnected with my comrades who had kindly offered to share their rooms at the hotel (an interesting group that consisted of old school chums and one of their sons) and we headed towards the growing Bersih storm.

As we wandered around town mixing with cheerful protesters, it became clear to us the magnitude of the response of the general public. It's difficult and frankly disingenuous to play the numbers game in this situation, but what we witnessed seemed like an ocean of multiracial goodwill.

The hordes of people made it impossible to manoeuvre and at times we simply followed the crowd and hoped it lead us somewhere interesting. We knew we had to be around the Dataran Merdeka area around 2pm but none of knew what was in store for us.

Protecting 'sanctity' of the historical site?

Dataran Merdeka. I was well acquainted with the arguments of pro- and anti-Bersih commentators on the proposal of the former to hold the protest in this venerable site.

No doubt most readers know where my sympathies rest. For me, not 'allowing' Bersih to hold the rally there was just another form of control that the regime wants to have over the spiritual landscape of Malaysia.

Consider how Dataran Merdeka emotionally resonates with a large section of Malaysians.

NONEOur independence may have been 'negotiated' and the so-called social contract between the various races hammered out before the utterance of Tunku Abdul Rahman at the historic square, but what is important that for a brief moment in Malaysian history we were all united under a common cause even though we were separated by race and creed.

This regime distorts our history. In other words, it wants to control our past. It sought to quash a gathering of like-minded multiracial citizens there, of their own free will seeking to change for the better (in my opinion) the destiny of this country.

This was not about protecting the 'sanctity' of this historic site but rather protecting the hegemony of Umno. By getting a court order barring Malaysians from this historic square, it sought to control our future as they already shape our past.

What Umno is saying is that they and they alone control the public and emotional spaces of this country. They and they alone will determine what we value as Malaysians and any dissent from this will eventually be met with violence.

After a while, I separated from my group and wandered the crowd-filled streets of Kuala Lumpur alone. Anticipation was high as the hour drew near and I found myself resting in a quiet corner outside a coffee shop (which like all others was doing roaring business) having a smoke and contemplating the scenes flashing before me.

A group of young Chinese, Indian and Malay college students approached me no doubt worried that this old geezer was suffering from exhaustion.

students bersih 3.0 photo taken by s thayaparan 2I assured them I was fine and one young Chinese boy (this was the first time anyone in the group had participated in something like this) asked, "Uncle, what if they use tear gas and water cannon?"

Before I could answer a voice beside me answered, "That is part of the deal".

This seemed to amuse the young crowd who started chanting "Part of the deal", "Part of the deal" as they skipped away from us. (Later when I heard of the violence I wondered if that young group got the baptism of fire they were worried about.) 'Us' being an aged but fit veteran of the Hindraf protest and me, a retired Navy commander who was eagerly waiting for 2pm.

We started talking and of course the talk centred on the Indian presence in this event. We were glad to see many Indian faces and he shared with me instant messages that informed us that PSM's S Arutchelvam and PKR's R Sivarasa were leading or were part of a large contingent from Brickfields.

For the BN side, Hulu Selangor MP P Kamalanathan would later on Al Jazeera display his famous hand-kissing techniques by being the Umno regime's sock puppet by perpetuating the misrepresentations that Bersih was being unreasonable in its demands and of the state's commitment to freedom of expression via their newly-minted freedom of assembly laws.

It was a sickening display of sycophancy that mocked the sacrifice of all those who had attended and were for the most part peaceful.

Numbers are not important

I parted company with my new found 'brother' and headed towards Masjid Jamek just in time to hear 'Saint' Ambiga's speech. It did its job of firing up the faithful but my thoughts were on the flaccid debate she had with that slick charlatan Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin.

NONEI suppose it was better than most public Malaysian debates with Ambiga actually addressing points raised but Khairy intent on building rhetorical strawmen in the hopes that his vague 'misrepresentation' points would be buttressed by obtuseness and slimy grinning bon mots.

Thinking back at the events of the past couple of days culminating in the Bersih rally, what bothers me the most is something Khairy said in his debate with Ambiga.

I heard too late about the violence that occurred and was on my way back home to do anything constructive (as if I could do anything constructive...) but what really got my goat was when during the debate, Khairy claimed kinship with Ambiga and the previous Bersih protesters because he too had been tear-gased and arrested. Really?

Don't misunderstand me, Khairy has every right to voice his opinion in a public space (which funnily enough is something that the regime he represents is deathly afraid of and with regards to Bersih 2.0, he had no problem associating his objections with those coming from the most virulent of racists, Perkasa

and the like) but what binds people in fellowship are the causes they subscribe to and not the obstacles that are thrown against them.

Remember the police pepper sprayed both protesters and looters. Did you get where I'm coming from Khairy?

In the end, the numbers are not important although my guess is that turnout was huge, surpassing last year's rally, but what the regime fears deep down inside, and this is hinted at by the desperate attempts of their cyber troopers to downplay Bersih 3.0, is what if the so-called silent majority, (those would did not attend Bersih 3.0) feel the same way as those who attended?

It's something that should keep them up at night. Welcome to your nightmare.

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