

**In defence of storming the barricades at Dataran
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By Abdar Rahman Koya**

COMMENT It is sad that despite the success of the Bersih 3.0 rally, the government's media have successfully managed to distract some of us from the larger issue which is the demand for electoral reforms.

Many of Bersih's own supporters, even those who took part in the rally of April 28, have been busy accusing fellow participants of breaking the law and indulging in violence. Some commentators cite the storming of the barbed wire barricade at Dataran Merdeka as the reason why the police shifted their position from "token resistance" back to their old ways.

dataran breach barricade cordon 290412Others were more crass, calling those who stormed the barricade as "hooligans" who took the law into their own hands despite the court order banning the crowd being inside the square. These so-called law abiding citizens of course do not ask questions like "which law?" or "whose courts?"

Then there are of course others who treat the rally as simply a parade, and that being peaceful means abiding by even the unfair laws symbolised by the barbed wires. Some are clearly been under the illusion that Bersih 3.0 was our answer to the Rio carnival.

Their political loyalty is only laid bare upon reading their 'eyewitness' reports taking pains to point out that majority of rally goers were not opposition supporters. In their inability to overcome their inborn allergy of opposition parties such as PAS and PKR, they even make the claim that shouts of 'reformasi' were not entertained by the crowd.

One eyewitness, none other than the daughter of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, even points out that no political leader in the country could have mobilised something as big as Bersih. (Gentle reminder: 14 years ago, 100,000 people gathered at the same spot in support of a certain individual that her father despises.)

The truth is that shouts of 'reformasi' and 'Hancur Najib' were reverberating in liberal doses on that day. Anyone who was there would tell you that slogans against Barisan Nasional had echoed with the same fury and spirited volume as the "non-partisan" shouts of "Bersih" or "Hidup Rakyat", and spiralled later into the LRT coaches and nearby restaurants.

Those who claim otherwise could be living in their smart sound-proofed walls of wishful thinking, selectively erasing out words they couldn't stomach.

Clamour for reform takes on a life of its own

Whatever the instructions given by Bersih leaders, the fact is that the clamour for electoral reforms has taken on a life of its own. It is therefore naive to expect that the tens of thousands of people who went there should not storm the barricade, having been told to be as close as possible to Dataran Merdeka.

dataran breach barricade cordon 290412 azmin aliA video clip going around on the Internet purportedly shows PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim giving the green light to his deputy president Azmin Ali (arrow) to open the barricades blocking Dataran Merdeka.

This clip is then used by some to condemn Anwar as the cause of the police brutality that followed.

I for one have never vehemently come to Anwar's defence other than my profound sympathy for the vile allegations that he and family have been made to endure. But if Anwar had indeed called for the

barricades to be torn down, I really don't mind putting a photograph of him as my desktop wallpaper!

The truth is that we all went there to break the law. A law devoid of fair play and justice, a law which is enforced to the detriment of ordinary citizens. The barricades blocking our march into Dataran Merdeka are the clearest and most tangible symbol of the government's animosity to the ordinary public. It would be foolish to be there and not dismantle them.

dataran breach barricade cordon 290412 police pixWe did not go there to merely shout and punch the air. We probably did so last year, singing in the rain at the gates of Stadium Merdeka.

This time, it is serious business. There is no time to waste. We are talking about tens of thousands of dubious names in the electoral roll, new voters whose citizenship are suspicious, the continued Big Brother mentality of our tax-funded television channels, and many more.

The peoples of Tunisia and Egypt would not have celebrated the downfalls of their tyrants had they followed the law and stayed outside the perimeters of the heavily fortified Tahrir Square. History is full of examples that for change to happen, removing police barricades is a norm, indeed the act has become a main ingredient of peaceful protests to claim back public places and venues denied to them.

NONEIt does not justify any high handedness by the security forces. History is replete with such examples. Change could not have happened if Iranians had obeyed the law against demonstrations during the Shah's tyranny in 1979, or if the Berlin Wall had not been vandalised in 1989, or if Gandhi had not picked up salt during his 240-mile Salt March in 1930, or if Rosa Parks had not stuck her butt in a bus seat in Alabama in 1955.

Pakatan Rakyat leaders should not pay attention to the constant focus by the police and the Umno media on the storming of the barricade, as if the act were a grave threat against public safety.

This is no time to defend from accusations of violence and vandalism. People were angry, they want reforms. More importantly, they want them now. There is no need to waste time claiming 'agents provocateurs' amongst the crowd.

Playing into the hands of propaganda

I find nothing wrong in what some protesters did at Dataran, and simply accusing them of being 'agents provocateurs' is not only cliched but also plays into the hands of propaganda. There is no use compiling evidence to back claims of police brutality.

Now is not the time to seek an apology for the treatment meted out on protesters, but an apology over the way institutions of democracy have been raped and systematically undermined. After all, it is why we braved the tear gas, defied police warnings, and by the same logic, stormed the barricades at Dataran Merdeka.

The April 28 rally is not a tea party or simply a 'walk' as some who participated in it would like to think. Those who feel we should not have stormed the barricades at Dataran might as well stay home clicking at the 'like' button of anti-government Facebook pages, or disappear into some obscure stadium as suggested by the Kuala Lumpur mayor, in keeping with the stand that DAP vice-chairperson Tunku Aziz Tunku Ibrahim has taken.

My only regret was that I was not part of the crowd who tore down the barricades. I was suffering from a tear gas attack near Masjid Jamek, with the multiracial 'hooligans'-cum-'pharmacists' coming to my help offering toothpaste, salt and water, before charging towards a police force that is armed to the teeth and trained to injure.

To those who fail to understand why we defied the law that day, I have this to say: "Kalau takut dengan risiko, jangan bicara soal perjuangan". Pull aside, chew the gum of defeat and watch the show. That will

be better than accusing those who risked personal safety to hammer in the urgency of reforms. To paraphrase a verse from the Qur'an, not equal are those who stay home and those who strive hard with their wealth and their lives.

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