

Bersih 3.0: Malaysia at its best and worst
MalaysiaKini.com
May 01, 2012
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iWITNESS Tired, sleepy and aching all over, but have to write this down to get it out of the mind and system before I can sleep. So here is my account of Bersih 3 written at 11pm on April 28, 2012.

As law-abiding and not terribly brave senior citizens, we had opted out of Bersih 2 when it was banned, pronounced illegal, KL on lockdown etc. This time, like so many others, we decided we had to show our support for clean and fair elections.

NONENeedless to say we did not expect trouble, but prepared for it nevertheless - salt, wet towel etc in a backpack. We were confident the crowd would be disciplined and the police restrained after the debacle of Bersih 2.

At 10.30am my husband and I caught the LRT to Pasar Seni. Packed train and the crowd chatty and friendly. From Pasar Seni at about 11am we strolled past the Central Market then along the embankment and down Tun Perak.

Crowds gathering everywhere, standing around or sitting on kerbs along the road.

We made our way through a very dense crowd near the corner of Tun Perak and Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman to find a place where we could sit that was raised a little above ground. (At 70 and husband almost 80, if we had tried to sit on the road or kerb we would have had great difficulty getting up again!).

Anyway, we found the ideal place. Three steps, then the pool of water below the water feature against a wall.

Mostly occupied, but people made room for us. Standing on the second step we could see quite a bit. Could also sit on that step. One row of people behind us on the third step. It was cool and under shade. The perfect spot.

11.30am: By now and the crowd was building up by the minute. I'd say 80% Malay, the rest Chinese with a smattering of Indians. We were getting more and more squashed, but could hold our excellent position. Very hungry by 1pm (forgot to bring food!) but could not move even six inches either way.

I took pictures. People as far as the eye could see in every direction. Perhaps about 40 or more rows of people in front of us - how dangerous this turned out to be later!

National anthem sung a few times and lots of chanting Bersih bersih, bebas bebas etc. All very pleasant despite the intense heat and hunger!

Chatted with a 75 year-old smiley Malay pak chik who had come that morning from Pahang. A mak chik in a tudung near me had come from Terengganu. Both simple folk, without too many words exchanged we felt the bond of being there for a common cause.

We couldn't hear the speeches that were made sporadically and too many people in front of us to see who was speaking etc. But had good view of the WALL of police facing us along the front of Dataran.

NONEOne small thing that speaks volumes about the discipline of the crowd up till the panic began: thousands were sitting and standing before us, yet hardly anyone smoked.

I had read it was one of the things NOT to do. That instruction was largely obeyed. Smokers would know

how amazing that is; three to four hours of waiting with a certain degree of tension and excitement yet such restraint!

At about 2.30pm Anwar made a speech, less than five minutes, to much cheering, standing on a raised platform. Could see him but could not hear. Anwar finished and must have left.

Could hear chanting 'Buka, buka, buka'. Suddenly saw frontlines moving forward towards Dataran just near where Anwar had been, and police RUNNING back. From our position it looked like they were really opening the barrier and letting the crowd into Dataran. Everyone near us cheered loudly and happily at this miraculous development!

All hell broke loose

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Without any warning (that we could hear), the water cannons fired and simultaneously tear gas was lobbed right into the thousands in front of us.

I thought we were so far back nothing would happen - the police would stop those who had gone past the barrier and the sit-in would continue or soon be over.

How wrong!!! They kept firing the tear gas canisters many many times right into the crowd - no break to allow people to run away. Pop pop pop they went, smoke everywhere. People running in every direction to get away.

NONE Hundreds came towards us - remember we were the very back line against a water feature and wall!!! Nowhere to go and wedged in by hundreds of stampeding and panicked people.

More and more who were gassed were coming at us to get to the pool below the water feature. We could not even get down off the two steps let alone get out our salt and towel etc.

Panicked crowd pushed us and the others on the steps down and crawled their way over our bodies to get to the water.

My husband was flat on his back, sprawled across the steps and couldn't even sit up. I was pushed half into the pool, backpack and all. I somehow managed to crawl out of the pool, tried to help him sit up but couldn't.

Too many people climbing over us. By this time the tear gas had reached us too. Blinded and retching, coughing etc. Could not breathe or see to get out of there even if we weren't being pushed and shoved backwards.

After some terrifying moments, the mass of people cleared and we got up and off the steps. With streaming eyes, coughing and spluttering, we tried to get away from the Dataran area.

Stumbled our way to the back but met with more tear gas coming now from the Jalan Raja Laut area. Nowhere to run. How to disperse? Why were they trapping people by firing from front and back? Such confusion for everyone fleeing and not knowing where to run.

Seeing our distress, some young Chinese came and gave us salt, calmed us down saying 'don't run, just stay here, it will pass'.

So we stayed put in midst of tear gas clouds and true enough the minute you put salt on tongue the symptoms subsided quite a bit.

Then some Malays who had taken refuge behind parked cars below in a little vacant lot behind Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman called out to us "auntie, uncle, mari sini, mari sini".

NONE We staggered over to them. They gave us water and more salt and were so caring. From behind the car we watched people running everywhere with police chasing them.

We decided we were staying crouched behind the cars till things cleared. Our companions all eventually left. We were alone in an eerie sort of calm.

Young police lout

Finally a bunch of policemen came by and saw us. One young lout yelled rudely "MARI SINI".

My husband walked slowly towards them but the lout kept shouting at me.

I then walked slowly towards him and said softly, jangan bising, kenapa bising, itu kurang ajar. He looked like he would have hit me.

Luckily a police officer came up and said gently "come with us".

I asked, "Will we be safe?"

"Yes. yes," he said. We'll take you out."

"So tell your man to stop shouting," I said.

And he did! The lout walked off.

We were escorted out near the Dataran and allowed to go. Police were everywhere escorting detainees and we were regarded with much suspicion by police and onlookers!!

We made our way to the Selangor Club. The gates were shut. We had to produce our membership card before they would let us in. What a sight we must have looked!!

Wet, red-eyed and bedraggled. Rushed to the restroom and got out of wet bersih tees, dried the hair, luckily we both had brought extra tee shirts.

Cleaned up as best we could and then sat down to tea and sandwiches, first food since b'fast. Good to feel civilised again!!. Now about 4pm.

Around five we decided to catch the LRT home. Well, another drama! Cops everywhere outside Selangor Club, lounging about smoking etc.

Politely this time one said in Malay, "Sorry uncle all roads to LRTs closed."

"How do we get home?" we asked. He shrugged apologetically and pointed down Jalan Raja Laut. Along the way, helpful people told us the only way out was the commuter train.

Sogo, Masjid Jamek, and Pasar Seni LRT stations were all out of bounds.

Quite a walk along Raja Laut, then a climb up a steep hill, no real path, and finally climbed over railings to get to the train. Couldn't use the overhead bridge as roads were blocked by police.

NONE All the way we were helped by young Chinese and Malays, pushing us from behind and dragging us ahead up the hill and over the railings!

It was an amazing feeling and worth the whole nasty experience to experience this kindness from strangers.

The train to Sentral and then the LRT to PJ were jam packed. Again the shared experience bonded everyone, young and old, all sharing what they had gone through to the strangers next to them.

Stunned at police reaction

Everyone stunned at the force and extent of police reaction just because some had breached the barrier.

Only at home were the aches and pains noticed and felt! Far worse though was the mental shock that our POLICE would endanger the lives of young and old. They knew the crowd was so dense that escape was extremely difficult.

They wanted us to disperse so why trap people in the middle by firing tear gas from the front and from behind too? And why were they chasing after people trying to get away from the gas?

Old people, women and children had to run for their lives.

It was not an illegal assembly, and they had succeeded in driving the crowd away from Dataran. Why then keep chasing all down the roads and alleys?

Why close off the LRT stations so people could not leave for home easily? So many unanswered questions. It didn't make sense.

But, I'm so glad to have done this - an eye-opener of how Malaysia could be, no race or religion mattered. People came to our aid. Most touching were the young Malay and Chinese boys and girls who tried to help us.

The best and worst of human nature was on display. We are okay. My husband lost his towel and hat and has some scraped skin on his leg.

It could have been so much worse. He got up and went to church at 6.30 this morning! All is well. So much to celebrate about Malaysia!

We ourselves are changed forever - less fearful now and if such a call were to come again from Civil Society, God willing, we shall be better prepared to respond!

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