

'Canister after canister, shot right into the crowd'

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By A Hindraf Supporter

This is not my first rally, and I doubt it will be my last.

I paid an early visit to Dataran at around 1.30am on that fateful day, to see for myself the concertina wire (razor wire) the police were said to have placed around it.

At that time I saw some personnel in a bucket truck placing, on lamp posts, what I later learnt were possibly the radio jammers used to block mobile phones and internet access during the rally.

I was happy to see that the concertina wires were not placed in a pyramid fashion (two rolls on the ground, with one more on top sitting on the groove between the lower two), and that the wire was not securely fastened to the metal brackets, and in fact were casually looped over the fastening clasps.

This meant that they could be removed quickly if needed. But I was worried that any crowd surge during the rally may push the lead row onto the wires, which can deliver very nasty injuries.

I made a mental note to make my way near the wire during the rally, and be ready to act if necessary. (The easiest way to cross a firmly fixed razor wire barricade is by throwing a covering material i.e. canvas, heavy carpet, over it).

But the way the wire was placed meant that simply releasing the wire from the hooks will mean that it will collapse like an accordion, at least in theory. (The police are no fools, and they would have known that the wires could be easily removed.)

The next morning, I made my way to Masjid Jamek at around noon, and waited there for my friend J, a first-timer.

I will not expand much on what has been said about the carnival-like air, and the sheer spirit of togetherness that everyone there felt, but I will add this much. If you have ever wondered what it means to truly feel like a Malaysian, and to be happy and safe amongst your fellow citizens, make your way to the next Bersih rally, I kid you not.

Once J arrived, we made our way to the barricades, standing at the grey metal TNB box right at the corner of Jalan Tun Perak and Jalan Raja.

The only point of contention I felt was the unnecessary 'entrances' by MPs and Aduns, with their entourages, one by one.

If they had any sense, they would have entered en masse, just like Anwar, Chegubard, Ambiga, Nurul, etc did on the truck, to lessen the danger to the masses who had to make way for them time and again, and could not accomplish the 'Duduk' part of the rally for more than a couple of minutes at a time.

I will exempt Karpal Singh from this, who also got the loudest cheer, as that man has always been a true lion, and because he is in a wheelchair.

The politicians could not have influenced the crowd beyond their immediate surroundings, as those of us standing less than 10 metres from them could nary hear a word they said, even with the loudhailers. That should give you an idea of the background noise created by a couple of hundred thousand, happy people.

I was of the idea that any attempt at breaching the barricades, and reclaiming Dataran for the people,

must only be made after 4pm, and the regular folk have made their way home, to save them from the police backlash, which would be a certainty.

One crucial sign that the police had other plans was the fact that the uniformed personnel manning the area near Masjid Jamek, crawled out of the area in their trucks, around 2pm.

While the crowd was good naturedly jeering them, the cops were seen smiling back. But, for the life of me, I could not figure out why every single one of them was pulled out. It was a very major warning sign, just like the loosely placed razor wire, and radio jammers.

When the breach happened, I knew something was up, as it seemed too easy, and there were no cops seen rushing in to stop the breach. I relied on instinct and shouted myself hoarse trying to keep the people from stampeding into Dataran, and surprisingly it worked.

A few young lads got a confused look on their faces because this Indian bloke was shouting at them to wait, and not move, and because they stopped, the rows behind them stopped as well.

I told J to follow so we could make sure everything was okay, and I immediately saw the water cannons being put to work.

As we tried to organise the confused supporters to sit on the road outside of the where the barricades were, thinking that the police will only try to reclaim the ground they were occupying, the first round of tear gas canisters landed.

I quickly got out my handkerchief and soaked it with the vinegar J had brought, and spent the next 20 minutes trying desperately to leave no one behind. I saw one young man who was just overwhelmed on the other lane of Jalan Tun Perak, but I could not go back to help him.

The FRU were within spitting distance, and my blood boiled at seeing them shoot canister after canister, right into the crowds. I will say this, the first time you get gassed is the worst, and I have been gassed quite a few times, and you can function, if you keep your wits about you. Just know that the effects will pass after a few minutes.

People were panicking, and some were climbing and squeezing through the metal grills at the court to escape. You cannot imagine the helplessness you will feel, and the anger, at seeing your fellow citizens being abused so, by those who should be protecting them.

One pakcik, who looked like he would not hurt a fly, grabbed a rolling canister which was spewing the vile smoke, and lobbed it right back at the FRU, and for a while I was laughing at how things could change in the blink of an eye.

I also had to make sure that the pakcik did not fall into their hands. Walking backwards, so I could keep an eye on the FRU, as well as use my voice to guide the stragglers, I finally saw the FRU retreat back around the corner, and we had a brief respite.

I spent the next half hour directing traffic near Wisma Char Yong, and directing them away from where the gas was being fired, with a couple of others.

While Rapid KL is talking about suing Bersih, the Metrobus drivers were gamely picking up people, and were driving through Leboh Ampang, even through the smoke, empty, so that at least some people could leave the area in safety. Hats off to them, they are now officially badasses in my book.

There was no way we could have left the area. The trains were not running, and we could see the water cannons targeting the very places where people had been trapped. The police gave no quarter, and if the people had to fight back, then it is because they had no place to escape.

You would have read of the brutality, and the aggression by the police, and that is all true.

As someone who has seen them in action many times before, understand this, never trust a Malaysian cop with your life.

Apart from the Metrobus drivers, the ambulance personnel were beyond amazing. I could not fathom how a system which produces such heartless policemen, can also produce medics who parked their ambulances right in the midst of tear gas and waterjets to get to the wounded. The Bar Council lawyers also did not abandon the people, and I salute them muchly.

One final point needs to be made about Bersih 3.0. While the crowd was multiracial, the number of Indian Malaysians there was below the numbers they represent in the populace.

And a lot of the blame for the apathy the Indians have right now has to be placed on the leadership of Hindraf, who have lost all direction and can no longer separate right from wrong.

To my fellow Malaysians I have this to say, the fight to save the country is not over yet, and while we may have to take body blows along the way, remember that we are not all that different, and the day will come when the trust and acceptance we have for each other when we face the oppression of the state, can and will become what we feel for each other at all times, and in all places.

This is a blessed country, we just have to clean it up a bit.

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