

'Your name is not on the voters' list'

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By Julian Tan

COMMENT "It's not on the list," said the lady in the pink floral scarf.

"What do you mean?" I firmly asked, trying my hardest to suppress the imminent trembling in my voice.

"Your name - it isn't on the list," she said monotonically, pushing her bifocals along the bridge of her nose.

My heart sank, fears were realised. I didn't just wait for over a year since registering to vote in that very same office and then take the 7.32am train to London, to be turned away from being a first-time voter.

I swiftly whipped out my iPhone, tapped on the fully bloomed sunflower icon that is my photo album to look for the screenshot of my voter status from the Election Commission's website.

Julian TanThere it was - 'Julian Tan Lip Yi - Registered (absentee voter), Voting method: Post. I pinched the screen of my iPhone to enlarge the view of this certainty and handed my phone over to the lady.

She had a quick glance and then flipped through the booklet of papers in the folder that contained "all" registered voters in the UK - the corners of the pages now slowly forming dog-ears from the repeated inspection.

"Tan Ying Hong... Tan Chiu Yeng... Nope, no Julian Tan Lip Yi."

At this moment, the man next to her looked up at me and began quizzing me about the details of my registration - where did I do it, when did I do it, where is my constituency.

"I did it here in this very office early last year. Kelana Jaya." I replied, beginning to be annoyed.

"I'm sorry your name is not on the record."

"But I am registered to vote! Look at this!" I said pointing to the screen of my iPhone.

A tall man from the corner of the room, well dressed in a smart navy blue suit emerged and told the lady who was tending to me, "If his name is not on the list. Escort him out. We do not have time for issues like this."

Issues like this? What did he mean? Is the issue of a registered individual being unable to vote because of a fault in your system not important enough to you? I am Malaysian. I have registered. And I have a right to cast my vote.

"Where did you come from?" asked the lady, in a voice so meek, trying to diffuse the tension.

"Cambridge."

A slight pause followed. She turned to the man in the suit and said, "He's from Cambridge." And then turned to me and said, "You have a seat first, we will have a look."

Did the name-dropping of my university put me back into the more respectable position I am used to? I didn't care. I just wanted to vote.

When adavance pays off

I took a seat by the mahogany furniture and waited, staring at the screenshot I took. Three minutes later and they came back with my ticket.

"It was in a different folder," he said as he nonchalantly passed me a slip to be used to obtain my ballot papers.

A different folder? Perhaps this was for people who had applied directly through the London office. I didn't want to jump to any conclusions.

After all, coordinating so many names and details must be very tedious and errors are sure to creep up. I was only so happy to be able to have a voice in the future of my country again.

I guess the reason I chose to relay this story is because I feel that if I hadn't been adamant enough, or lucky enough, I would have been turned away despite having all relevant ballot slips ready for me in the room next door.

If a person had not been as uncompromising or resolute as I was, they would have left the building without casting their votes!

I genuinely feel that what I experienced probably was an honest mistake, but it is mistakes like these that fuel speculation about the credibility of the 13th general election.

We hear so many stories about 'phantom' voters. We are expected to thoroughly examine our ballot papers, making sure no printed marks are present that could make our votes void.

We have to deal with trying not to stain our ballot papers with indelible ink (because the ink is applied before the casting of the vote - how does this make any sense?).

We shouldn't have to worry about these things when exercising our basic right to deciding our government.

Democracy should be easier

The election procedures feel so archaic. So much is said about how these measures are in place as dirty tricks for the BN to stay in power. If this is untrue, not much is being done to refute these claims - the election procedure for some reason does not feel very fair. Democracy should be easier.

As an example, the top left-hand corner of the ballot papers I received contained a serial number that was also printed (number for number) on a separate witness form together with my name and identity.

I politely asked the officer how the vote would be anonymous with this glaring actuality. Some moments passed before he resigned to saying, "I don't know. This is what is being given. That's a good observation."

He then continued to explain to me the procedures of voting, unfazed by the confrontation.

I interrupted him and asked if he could get back to me about this before I marked the 'X' in the box. He said he could get back to me by the end of the day.

The end of the day? I didn't have that sort of time. He then suggested that I leave and come back later and before I could respond, he took a stamp out, pressed it firmly into the inkpad and was about to stamp my envelope.

"No, no, I will just vote now," I exclaimed, pulling the envelope from his tight

grasp. I was admittedly afraid that the stamp would somehow make things more complicated than they already were.

I looked around and every one else had serial numbers on both their ballot slips and witness forms. So, I resigned to following the rules.

"If you could get back to me about how anonymity is maintained by this procedure, I would very much appreciate it," I then proceeded to say, before heading to vote for the very first time.

So much can be speculated and some people have told me that my story is why they refuse to vote - it is just too much trouble, too much uncertainty to make any real impact. How do I even know if my vote will be counted in the end?

To them I say, suspicion is easy but gets you nowhere. In fact, suspicion is why we need to vote. We can only do as much as we are able to. And in a democracy this means that the least and indeed the most you can do on polling day is to head to the polls and vote!

As May 6 looms (the day after the final votes are cast), I feel a certain excitement and dread for what the future holds. But I rest in the solace that I have done my part, and I hope you do yours too, fellow Malaysians.

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