

Why so few Malays in Bersih 4?

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COMMENT The question most frequently asked on Bersih 4 is, why are there so few Malays?

I don't buy the two most common answers: first, PAS does not participate and Harapan Baru does not have the clout; second, Malays are worried of violence and chaos.

For me, the answer is straightforward: the Malays feel politically vulnerable because three main Malay-based parties - first PKR, then PAS, now Umno - are split while the Chinese are seemingly so united behind the opposition especially DAP.

To discourage the Malays to join Bersih 4, one may just need to warn them, if Malays join in enthusiastically, then not only Najib Abdul Razak will go, Umno will lose power, too, and the now politically assertive Chinese will dismantle the New Economic Policy (NEP) and weaken Islam.

Against this backdrop, even if PAS has mobilised, Malay turnout will still be weak because of this anxiety. And 'violence and chaos' cited in the Merdeka Center survey is but the code word for the collapse of Umno's one-party state.

Will I blame our Malay friends who don't join us? Of course no. Everyone has every right to want the country to be cleaner, freer and more democratic. That needs not have anything to do with ethnicity or religion.

I will not even blame them on their anxiety. Can people force themselves to not be anxious?

Simply because the dismantling of Umno's one-party state is a colossal change, all of us need a soft landing, not only the Malays who have been told that they will be 'bangsat' without Umno.

Malaysia's political system has been so winner-takes-all, with losers not only marginalised but often also persecuted. Clearly, this is the fear many Umno members harbour.

We can't have a smooth transition until we can convince fellow Malaysians in Umno this, the party(-state) is over but Umno can choose to transform itself into a competitive democratic parties - like Indonesia's Golkar, Taiwan's KMT and Mexico's PRI.

It is more realistic to ensure you can come back after losing than insisting you will have lost.

In full recognition of the political reality, Bersih 2.0 makes it clear while pressing for Najib's resignation is necessary for the institutional reforms we need, Bersih 4 is not a rally to end Umno's rule and will not force Najib out ala the Philippines' People's Power or Arab Spring.

We will end the rally peacefully tonight with the Merdeka countdown.

Aiming to empower Malaysians

We aim to empower Malaysians so that independence is a psychological reality that they fear neither each other because of differences nor the authoritarian government.

If everything ends well tonight, this goal would have been achieved although the push for Najib's exit remains an uphill battle.

Coming back to the low Malay turnout, while we certainly need to work harder to get more Malays to the streets, should we go this far to border lamenting, why are there so many Chinese? Should the Chinese feel sorry that there are too many of them?

It is time we break this myth that we can't do anything legitimately until we get the all ethnic representation, or worse, in the right composition: 1 Malay, 1 Chinese, 1 Indian, 1 Sarawakian, 1 Sabahan, etc.

I slept on the pavement on Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman last night. It was like a refugee camp with many people - mostly in the illegal yellow Bersih 4 T-shirts - sleeping on not only the pavements, but also the middle of the road. Some brought sleeping bags, some used newspapers as their mat, others just slept on the road.

Why did they sacrifice their comfort in bed? Many of them, like me, have booked hotel rooms for refreshing themselves, but chose to sleep on the streets just to show our yearning for change. Most of them were Chinese while there were also some Malays - middle-aged men, youth and a couple.

Woke up at about 6, I saw a good group of volunteers giving away free coffee, with placards with the words 'Tak mau duit kopi' and chanting, "Minum kopi, tak mau duit kopi". I was so moved by their creativity.

Have I forgotten to mention this? They were all Chinese. So were a bunch of volunteers I bumped into last night busy collecting rubbish - they were all Chinese, too.

I examine my own anxiety which appeared since the beginning of the rally - that there were too few Malays.

I ask myself, what's wrong that most of them are Chinese? Should I feel sorry that some of my bedfellows on Jalan TAR are not Malays? Should I wish that some of the volunteers should not be there because they are not Malays?

No, why should all the good things they do be less good just because they happen to be in one ethno-religious category and not the other? Why?

Aren't we hypocritical if we let our pragmatism go mad to the extent that we judge one not by one's behavior but by one's colour or creed?

I see two positive implications in the phenomenal Chinese turnout in the Bersih 4 rally, beyond their patriotism and sense of political efficacy.

First, most of them probably have not been exposed to Malay language and culture from indie music, poetry reading to prayers in the open in such intensity. Many may have yet to remember not to blow their vuvuzela and chant during Muslims' prayer time.

A learning process

Some may have overlooked cultural sensitivity in their rejection of corrupt readers. But this is a learning process, isn't it?

Second, if Bersih 4 ends well and peacefully, this will set a precedent that grand rallies can be peaceful, inclusive and strengthening our nationhood, even when the ethnic composition of protesters is skewed.

There will be a long warfare of perception after tonight finale.

On one end, Umno's mouthpiece will do their best to portray Bersih 4 as a Chinese plot to topple Umno and sideline the Malays. On the other end, naysayers will repeat the old tune that Bersih 4 is a failure because Najib won't resign after tonight.

I urge all friends out there in Bersih 4 to tell your own story, best with powerful pictures worthy of thousand words.

We have two stories to tell to every other Malaysian whom we may encounter in daily life or on social media:

First, the Bersih 4 rally is dominated, not by ethnic Chinese, but patriotic Malaysians.

Second, the Bersih 4 rally is not failure but a great success, because we find hope and solidarity in each other.

We are Malaysia.