

Bersih 4 was not a feel-good picnic

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COMMENT When Bersih 4 ended at the midnight of Aug 30, it ended on a high note. The rally defied expectations. Those who had thought it would not be able to sustain 34 hours of street protest without experiencing police harassment and violence sparked by agitators were proven wrong.

An incredibly huge crowd celebrated Bersih 4's success at the grand finale with an impassioned rendering of the national anthem when the clock struck 12.

Mingguan Malaysia accused the rally of having been controlled and dominated by the DAP. That's utter bullshit. The DAP could not possibly command this kind of turnout on any given day.

In saying so, the pro-Umno newspaper also insulted the rally's organisers, Bersih 2.0. It denied them the credit of having done a marvellous and exceptional job of putting together the event and making sure it remained peaceful.

Indeed, if credit is to be given to anyone for having drawn the rally participants to Dataran Merdeka in hordes, it must go to Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. The alleged corruption inherent in his receipt of RM2.6 billion from an Arab donor (or so his Umno lackeys say) roused Malaysians to stand up as one against him.

Even people who would otherwise not take part in such demonstrations came. They were joined by many others who were getting involved in a Bersih rally for the first time. Many of them were young people. They felt they had to come. Why? Because of Najib.

They couldn't tolerate him and his alleged wrongdoings any more. And for that, they were willing to risk being tear-gassed and even being arrested by coming out.

They even defied the government's last-minute ban against the wearing of yellow T-shirts with 'Bersih 4' printed on them. Many came openly and unfearingly wearing the T-shirts. And with pride.

On the first day, there were at least 100,000 on the streets adjacent to Dataran Merdeka in the day. At night, there were still 20,000 left. Of these, 5,000 remained to spend the night sleeping on pavements and streets.

At the very least, those who stayed overnight have to be commended for their commitment.

The next day, many came back to continue the rally. They were joined by those who couldn't attend the first day.

Numbers grew to at least 200,000

When night came, the numbers grew and grew to at least an awesome 200,000. And most remained till midnight to mark the end of the rally with the singing of 'Negaraku' and the ushering in of Merdeka Day. That made for a poignant closing.

Add the 200,000 present at the end to the countless others who had come the first day but did not return for the second and the total number of rally participants would surely total more than 200,000, perhaps amount to even 300,000.

Bersih 4's organisers put the overall turnout at 500,000, but I think that's probably an overestimation. Nonetheless, the message is clear. A lot of Malaysians showed up at the rally, and they spoke volumes with their massive presence.

It is true that an overwhelming proportion of the participants consisted of Chinese Malaysians, and that the rally would have been all the more meaningful and effective if more Malays had taken part, but as political scientist and Bersih 2.0 committee member Wong Chin Huat points out, "the Bersih 4 rally is dominated, not by ethnic Chinese, but by patriotic Malaysians".

And even if critics are quick to spin that it is mainly the Chinese who are disgruntled with Najib, even if pro-Najib supporters are trying to denounce them as being troublemakers who are unpatriotic for being part of an illegal rally, it is worthwhile to note what socio-political observer Denison Jayasooria has to say about that:

"It is a patriotic call from the Chinese. They are not saying they are packing up their bags and leaving the country. They are doing this because they are concerned with the way the country is being run."

I say that everyone who joined the Bersih 4 rally because they believed in its cause was, regardless of their race, a patriot.

Irresponsible elements will continue their spin

To be sure, Bersih 4 will not have any immediate effect. It will not cause Najib to be unseated as prime minister. The next phase now kicks off with the hard work of Bersih 2.0 trying to convince parliamentarians to take a no-confidence vote against Najib and to push for a general election sooner than scheduled.

Meanwhile, irresponsible elements will spin that the rally and its apparent domination by the Chinese can pose a political threat to the Malays (albeit such a spin holds no water and should therefore be more correctly categorised as a lie).

And cynics will say that most of those who went to the rally got little out of it except to stand and look at other rallygoers because the numbers were so big that movement was impeded, so that it was almost impossible to get to the main stage and listen to the

speakers or to even do anything much except periodically yell when prompted, "Hidup, hidup! Hidup Bersih!". So, what was the point of it all?

And while these cynics will even say that the whole affair was just a feel-good carnival or, worse, a picnic for urban, middle-class Malaysians to converge at and feel proud of themselves for having done something for the country and the future generations but not realising that they achieved nothing, I think the cynics would be off the mark.

All these things didn't matter. What mattered was being there and standing up to be counted.

After all, citizens have no other recourse to collectively express their feelings. All the frustrations they feel about what is happening to the country because of the machinations of one man cannot be channelled as effectively as in a street demonstration.

Bersih 4 was all they had to speak up as one.

No one can take that away from them.

And for them, just being there, to be with a massive crowd of others who shared the same cause, to directly feel that they were not alone in feeling frustrated about corruption and other ills and wanting these ills to be dealt with, that was enough.

Many came away from Bersih 4 with an unforgettable experience, a feeling of solidarity and sharing, a feeling of affection for fellow Malaysians. Many were moved to tears, many found joy, many more felt what it really meant to be Malaysian.

It was therapeutic, it was exhilarating, it was cathartic, it was unifying. If doomsayers want to take anything away from the rallygoers, or toll the death-knell of Bersih as a people's movement, they themselves can go to blazes.

How can you spoil a party that means so much to its participants? How can you spoil a party that brings people together for a common good? And how can Bersih not live on when it is and will remain the people's only platform for speaking up and showing how much they feel for their country?

I cannot say this often enough. Everyone who joined the Bersih 4 rally is a patriot. When they sang 'Negaraku' at the closing, they sang it with pride and gusto. What more could the country want from such citizens?