

## **LETTER | A Malaysian's reflection in the pandemic**

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**Tan Jia Shen**

LETTER | On March 13, in South London of United Kingdom, hundreds of people gathered at the Sarah Everald Vigil to mourn the passing of Sarah Everald, a lady who was allegedly murdered by a police officer. This vigil, despite initially intended to run for only an hour in a peaceful and socially distanced fashion, was cracked down on by the police force. Several individuals were handcuffed. The official reason was to ensure no breach of the social distancing law - but people did not buy any of that. This sent a wave of rage across the country and turned the protest into the scale of thousands, demanding the resignation of the police commissioner.

As we speak, this incident has taken over the headlines of UK newspapers and has drowned out all other issues. The formidable public pressure made the London mayor and Home Secretary call for an independent commission to investigate the matter, as well as the prime minister to chair a meeting of the crime and justice taskforce over this.

What happened offshore was far away from home. But reading this gave me a sense of déjà vu. What would happen if the same incidents - the same police abuse of power, the same illiberal crackdown of protest - happen in Malaysia?

It is not hard to find parallels. A few days back, there was a peaceful vigil (above) before the Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur attended by less than a hundred people in solidarity with the Myanmar people terrorised by the Myanmar military junta. The police forcefully dispersed the crowd, despite the vigil being organised peacefully and sanitarily. This incident faded in public memory and did not get media coverage, much less public attention.

This is not an isolated incident. There have been, in the past, many small-scale protests that have been treated the same way with no repercussions or reflection on the Malaysian zeitgeist.

You might say the Sarah Everald vigil is different. I agree. It is compounded by both calls for better women protection - an element of feminist activism as well as the backdrop of a meditated police law amendment that gives the police bigger power to crack down on protests.

But if Malaysia is short of anything, it is not instances of draconian use of executive power. Easy examples abound - the recent zombified version of the

Anti-fake News Act (Emergency Ordinance 2021 no.2), the suspension of Parliament that is absolutely, sincerely done for the sole purpose of curbing Covid-19 (forgive my emphasis - I am not rich nor powerful enough to flagrantly flout rules yet not receive any punishment).

But we have not reacted to these developments in equal measure. Instead of taking it to the streets, which is the imbued democratic mechanism to react to failures of democracy, we stayed at home pliantly and protest in the most comfortable way - social media. The prevailing narrative is 'I would've done it but for the pandemic!', which is a legitimate and fair reason.

For a long time, I myself believed that is the correct philosophy that would guide us through this pandemic, everything else can wait. But recent events, not only the UK vigil but the Myanmar protest as well as the Thai protest against the monarchy, made me think - how much of abusive governance will we take before we decide enough is enough and go to the streets despite the pandemic? What is our breaking point?

My answer is pessimistic. I think we can take a lot more of abusive governance before we break. For a majority of Malaysians, fundamental liberties are placed at a much lower rung of priority compared to health safety.

We snipe at the Europeans and Americans for being overly protective of their fundamental liberties in the face of the pandemic; we take pride in our cooperation and docile culture, which at one point made us a shining point on the map in terms of battling Covid-19; but now we need to face the painful and plain truth - we are neither successful in battling Covid, nor are we successful in fending off tyrants. We lost at both games and I think it is time for the nation to do some soul-searching over how we value democracy.

To mature democracies, democratic rights and fundamental liberties are an integral part of life in much the same way as work and food are. If life must go on, then its necessities, food, work, and the exercise of democracy, must too. The virus is undoubtedly serious, but an overreach of state power can be, if not more, dangerous. The measures to fend off viruses must be balanced with the measures to defend fundamental liberties.

Not quite the same in Malaysia. In terms of countervailing the autocratic inclination of the Perikatan Nasional government, we have failed big time. We let the pandemic drown out other considerations such as fundamental liberties, and accepted the illegitimate rule of PN for the stability we did not get. The inclination of nascent democracies to readily sacrifice their fundamental liberties for basic, biological survival is why many young democracies have failed.

In many parts of the world - the African continent, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, despots exploit the people's mentality of self-preservation to rule. The inability to conceptualise the importance of democracy - an idea - made the masses readily forgo it when faced with a conflict between democracy and tangible things like food, survival and safety.

I believe it is fair to say this value system over placing health over fundamental liberties and democratic rights has not served us well. We have the most draconian of laws - ones that treat our most vulnerable citizens like criminals, but we still do not fare any better than many countries. Perhaps it is time to rethink our national philosophy.

If the pandemic cannot stop our work, then why should it stop our democracy? More importantly, pandemics come and go however deadly, but tyrants will try to cling to whatever they can to stay in power, which can be as long as decades.

The Thai people did not let the pandemic stop them from protesting against their monarchy. Now they have a compromised but they are also one of the best-performing countries in battling Covid-19 in the region. The American people, the English people - they all protested despite the pandemic. To them, it is always liberty over safety.

In the book *The Narrow Corridor* by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, they argued that liberty is forged in the narrow corridor between a strong government and a strong civil society. The most prosperous countries in the world have a balanced battle between a strong government and a strong civil society. A civil society that responds ferociously to any governmental overreach.

In the short run, it will cause death and bloodshed. But in the long run, it shapes governments that are careful and respectful of fundamental liberties. It forces it upon the government that the government is not infallible and trains government to act for the society's welfare effectively.

This is the recipe for the prosperity and strength of a nation. This is why America, despite its hoo-has in the pandemic which disappointed many Asian countries, is quickly becoming the most inoculated. The national zeitgeist of liberty over safety does not eliminate the possibility of failures and errors, but it ensures the possibility of a quick recovery from those failures.

We do have a strong and literate civil society, but unfortunately, we do not share the philosophy of a mature democracy. It might be a long way to go. Once, we were the beacon of democracy in Southeast Asia, with our Bersih movements and successful elections. But now we are the sick man of the region, plagued and battled.

The fact that no public universities in Malaysia offer a degree in philosophy perhaps sums up the situation well. The problem is philosophical and we are ill-equipped to solve it.

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