

'Glorious days' of Kampung Baru old timers
Malaysiakini.com
May 19, 2007
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special report

An afternoon chat over teh tarik with some elderly gentlemen in Kuala Lumpur's Kampung Baru revealed something more than ambivalence among many Malays regarding the May 13 racial riots in 1969.

Many residents of Kampung Baru - when asked regarding their views of May 13 and whether the episode should be re-examined by the government and re-debated by the public - said the episode was a "dark spot" in the communal history of Malaysia and urged for "the past to remain in the past."

Resurrecting May 13, they said, would be like digging up the graves of the tragedy. Official records

claim the two-day riots - which saw the worst destruction in Kampung Baru - led to the death of 137, 342 injured, 109 vehicles burned, 118 buildings destroyed and 2,912 persons arrested.

"What we should be doing is talk of more pressing current issues, such as the price hike of basic goods," said one 51-year old resident, who wanted to be identified only as Abdul Rahman.

"I bought a glass of coffee this morning and was charged as much as RM1.70! Why rationalise May 13 any further? The fear that it conjures is enough," he added.

Paramilitary units

A conversation with some other old-timers, however, turned quickly into a session of reminiscing - as old soldiers do of their exploits in battle - of those days 38 years ago when a number of them, then active members of the notorious Kampung Baru gangs, became 'champions' of the Malays.

Their eyes lit up and their voices gained a tone of youthful excitement as they recalled the days when they were in the 'frontlines' of the May 13 clashes against gang members from the Chinese-dominated area of neighbouring Chow Kit.

Sixty-year old 'Alang', recalled with glee when he - armed with a crudely-made 'sword' hammered into shape out of a metal pipe and wearing the selendang merah (red sash) of his silat/gang group - and other machete-wielding Malay gangsters and other youths from Selangor and other states served as Kampung Baru's self-appointed paramilitary units.

Many other silat/gang group members wore blue selendang. Regardless of what they wore, however, only those who had been in gang fights before May 13 could endure the violence, said Alang.

"We were already used to fighting. That is why we could be in the frontline of the May 13 clashes. Those who had not known violence already could not get used to it. They could not even stand the sight of violent death," said the father of nine.

"One person, for example, was at first very spirited when Dato Harun (Idris, then menteri besar of Selangor) first called for Malay youths to rally at his house. He had sharpened his keris and whispered all sorts of invocations over the blade.

"But when the time comes to face them (the Chinese gang-members), he fainted out of fright before anything even happened!" he said laughing.

Alang invoked, predictably, the name of legendary warrior of 14th Century Malacca, Hang Tuah, as if to sanctify the semangat Melayu (Malay spirit) that had rampaged Kampung Baru and laid to waste Chinese homes and shoplots.

"Violence and death, when you've familiar with it, becomes thrilling. The clash and the chase for your enemies actually becomes fun. You are not afraid of death any more," said Alang.

Seventy-year old 'Syed', who was then a staff-sergeant in the Royal Malay Regiment's intelligence division, boasted of how he rescued Malays - including his pregnant wife - and Chinese trapped in buildings and caught between the impending clashes of warring groups.

Even Syed, however, spoke admiringly of those gang leaders who had risen to "take back" Malay rights and forced the government to pay attention to the Malays' socio-economic conditions. Kampung Baru, then and now, is among the poorest sectors of Kuala Lumpur.

Gang leaders were united

Among such gang leaders, said Syed, were those who went by such names as 'Ahmad Chicago' who controlled one part of Kampung Baru, 'Mat Whiskey' (not his real nickname) who controlled "this side of Kampung Baru", and 'Mat Seram' who controlled yet another part.

"If not for May 13, would there have been the Felda schemes?" asked Syed, citing the Federal Land Development Authority and other affirmative-action policies for bumiputeras.

Other gangs who had a field day during May 13 were Long Futong, '2-4', 'Sampat', and '0-8'. Leaders of some of the gangs went on to become senior political leaders and government figures.

"Kampung Baru, which was known then as a 'black area' ruled by gangs where not even the police would set foot in. Alang was feared," said Syed of his friend.

"An outsider stepping into this side of Kampung Baru was sure to get it from him!" he laughed as Alang grinned in acknowledgment.

Among the highlights of May 13, said Alang, was the uniting of gang leaders and members who previously had bad blood between them.

"We can never forget the day when Ahmad Chicago and Mat Whiskey hugged each other and made peace in front of the mosque," said Alang. PAS members from Kelantan and Umno members from Johor also forgot their political differences and united.

The elderly gentlemen lamented the subsequent extinction of semangat Melayu and the spirit to "stand up for the community" among the next generation of Malays.

"The only thing Malay youth are notorious for nowadays are being Mat Rempits and getting high on drugs. They're oblivious to the fact this land is no more referred to as tanah air Melayu

(Malay land). Even (Rail operator) Keretapi Tanah Melayu is now only known as KTM Bhd.

"Soon, everything else Malay in this country will be lost," he said bitterly.

Syed spoke highly of then deputy premier Tun Abdul Razak who, after May 13, took over as prime minister from Tunku Abdul Rahman and put into place the New Economic Policy (NEP).

"Tunku had given too much face to foreigners," said Syed.

Let bygones be bygones

"May 13 itself and afterwards brought the Malays many blessings. Unfortunately, we're not much better now than we were four decades ago. If May 13 happened again, most Malays would not be ready," said Syed disapprovingly.

Shaking her head in disagreement, 56-year-old 'Hamidah' urged for all parties, especially academics and political leaders, to let bygones be bygones.

"Let it go. We ordinary people have no space to talk of such issues. It's only the ruling and opposition political parties that still argue about May 13," she said quietly.

In agreement with her, Abdul Rahman, the resident who had witnessed May 13 as a 12-year-old, suggested that while the popular masses had gotten caught up in the emotions of the times, it was the political leaders who did and still exploit communal issues for political gain.

"There is no need to relive the issues. The only lesson May 13 teaches us is that ordinary people like us 'freak out' over the issues that are raised, but are still used as pawns by the political elite.

"Now, they're doing it again by raising the past instead of solving current problems," he said.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/67459>