

Merdeka: Dream or nightmare?
Malaysiakini.com
Aug 30, 2008
Sim Kwang Yang

The 51st Merdeka celebration seems muted this year.
MCPX

The severe cut in budget allocation probably has something to do with the reduced scale with which our nation's independence is being commemorated.

Last year, the half-century independence celebration cost the nation some RM100 million. It seems like an obscene amount of money just to parade the pomp and ceremony of patriotism. Now that the country is engulfed in a global crisis in oil and food prices with inflation rate hitting the highest peak in 27 years, such lavish spending on Merdeka celebration would not go down so well with a rakyat that has just given the BN the worst thumping in 50 years!

`malaysia merdeka 50th anniversary 280807 ethnicWhat it shows is that the grand celebration last year, and many years before that, were all popped up by huge allocation of public funds. When the degree of national joy on Independence Day is measured by how much money is available to make things happen, something is seriously wrong with our country.

Sarawakians and Sabahans will grumble about the injustice of the Malay nationalist grand narrative to no end. Once again, they will remind the world about the historical fact that Malaysia came into being on 16 September 1963, and not 31 August 1957. But these are the marginal voices out there, on the other side of a vast expanse of sea water, seldom heard in Kuala Lumpur, and so hardly deserve serious attention. The official history book cannot be wrong, or at least that is what many Malaysians think.

This year though, the voices of discontent from the East may have to be taken seriously. Sabah MPs from the ruling coalition have been making rebellious noises in Parliament. Some are eloquent in ways only Sabahan and Sarawakian MPs are capable of.

What is the use of living in a big house, they asked, if you are denigrated to a small corner near the stinking toilet? Would it not be better if you move into the master bedroom in a smaller house? Needless to say, I share their sentiment entirely.

Anwar Ibrahim factor

Suddenly, their words resonate ominously following the by-election at Permatang Pauh on the eve of Independence Day this year. The head honcho of PKR and Pakatan Rakyat, Anwar Ibrahim, has just won a significant victory in a three-corner fight, defeating the BN candidate by a two-to-one majority. Apparently, the multiracial electorate of that constituency in Penang felt revolted by the sodomy charges brought against him.

anwar pc permatang pauh 02 260808Anwar has on many occasions reiterated his plan to persuade sufficient MPs from the BN in East and West Malaysia to defect to the opposition by Sept 16 to form a majority in Parliament, and thereby bring about a regime change. If and when that happens, the PM will probably recommend to the Agong to dissolve Parliament to pave way for another general election. If the Agong should refuse his request,

and exercise his discretion in appointing Anwar as the new PM, as is provided for under the Federal Constitution, then what will happen?

Already, there are the odd over-imaginative commentators who wonder aloud whether the ensuing confusion would entice the armed forces to take over the government in a coup-de-tat. I suppose they have been mistakenly inspired by events in Thailand. But I doubt very much if that will happen. Our military has never enjoyed the kind of influence in national politics as the Thai soldiers. They have had a half-century tradition of obedience and loyalty to their political masters in the civilian government.

So I am waiting to celebrate my National Day on Sept 16. Events in the next two and a half weeks ought to be messy. Everybody would be holding his breath to see whether or how Anwar Ibrahim is going to pull another giant rabbit out of his huge political hat! At least, you cannot blame Malaysian politics for being dull these days!

Nevertheless, we are so embroiled in the daily political drama unfolding before our eyes that perhaps there has not been sufficient reflection on the true meaning of independence.

Certainly, for young Malaysians, it means just another public holiday, for shopping and lazing around. On the eve, it offers another occasion for them to descend upon Bukit Bintang in large numbers for another orgy of noisy and boisterous fun and the countdown to midnight.

Fearful negative connotations

What independence means is nothing less than national liberty, freedom from the yoke of colonialism, the right to determine our own destiny, and the power of self-determination so that our citizens will enjoy the fruit of their labour. We are supposed to be the master of our own destiny. Those were our dreams, and the dreams of our founding fathers.

Independence also means freedom from the bondage to a foreign power, from being taxed without our consent, and the lack of the responsibility for the defence of our homeland.

These ringing words that were so powerful and loud in the 50s and 60s are now seldom heard, as if they have been forgotten. In fact, we discover that those laws and regulations that were enacted and used to fetter the freedom of Malaysians by our former colonial masters are now used to oppress dissidents and critics of the government.

merdeka 51st celebration 290808In fact, freedom is now painted as a word with fearful negative connotations. Day in and day out, we are reminded by our elected leaders that freedom is equal to license, the nihilistic idea of doing what one wants without responsibility and restraint.

Freedom has been equated with seditious tendency, with people going wild and violent because they have ultra-sensitive religious and racial nerves, and with riots and rampant killing on the streets that will destroy stability and economic development.

For 50 years, we may have said farewell to our former British colonial masters, but their colonial instruments for the oppression of the people and the suppression of their fundamental liberties have been preserved, reinforced, and abused by the same group of ruling elite to ensure their hold on political power.

Like their former colonial masters, the new ruling class in the new nation-state has monopolised all rights towards the articulation of national interest. In the name of that national interest, which only they can narrate, they - like their colonial masters before them - severely limit citizens' rights to free speech, free expression of ideas, freedom of the press, and freedom of association. Until today, an assembly of more than five persons is still considered by the police as an illegal assembly. What has our half century of independence achieved?

In the half century until today, I have grown from a young boy of nine to an old man of 60. I have watched how political discourse in our public sphere has been dominated by the language of fear, especially the language of xenophobic fear of one race for another. Like their former colonial masters, the post-independence ruling elite have entrenched this pathos of nameless fear to divide and rule a nation of many races, and a small multiracial handful of politicians and their cronies grow fabulously rich overnight.

'I have a dream'

In the past week, numerous orators in the American Democratic Convention have made reference to the fact that this year marks the 45th anniversary of the "I have a dream" speech made by Martin Luther King. Meanwhile, they proceeded to nominate an African-American to be a presidential candidate for the first time in their history.

bill hilary clinton campaign 061007 obamaIt must be noted that King's dream is not a dream only for Afro-American dream; it was meant to be the reformulation of the American dream. Barack Obama's campaign is run entirely on an appeal towards reviving and reinventing this American dream, rather than succumbing again to Bush's past campaign of xenophobic fear.

Back in Malaysia, we have Malay dreams, Indian dreams, Chinese dreams, Sarawakian and Sabahan dreams. We have as many dreams as there are ethnic communities, thanks to the 50 years of race based politics. So where is the one Malaysian dream to unite and define our polyglot citizens into one proud people.

2008 has been a watershed in our history. To describe any historical event as a watershed is to indulge in cliché I know. In this case, the cliché may be warranted.

From here on, the political waters in our country may be flowing in a different direction. The idea of justice for all may be just the kind of concept that is needed to transcend the narrow constricting strait jacket of racial politics. The old idea of "justice" needs to be beefed up, but the ten-thousand mile long march must begin with the first step.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/88866>