

Merdeka memories and dreams
Malaysiakini.com
Aug 29, 2009
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In a day or two, Malaysia will be celebrating her 52nd birthday.

For Sarawak and Sabah, it will be their 46th Independence Day on September 16 this year.

The official Merdeka celebration will be somewhat subdued this year, because the day falls on the fasting month of Ramadan.

Ostentatious and expensive mass gatherings are also perhaps against the grain at a time when the world is still very much in the grip of a global economic melt-down and with the H1N1 scare.

I was nine-year of age and studying in primary three in a Chinese primary school in 1957.

In 1963, when Malaysia came into being, and my home state of Sarawak was finally free from British colonial rule, I was 15, studying in form three in St Joseph's Secondary School.

Our language of instruction was English.

Those were heady times indeed. There was an armed communist insurgency in most parts of the country.

There were daily press reports of the clashes between the security forces and the communist insurgents and some of my friends and teachers from the primary schools would disappear into the jungle.

Sometimes, I would wake up to see huge slogans in Chinese painted on the wall of the flat around the corner.

Occasionally, a red flag with stars would flutter from the lamp-post.

The unions which the communists had infiltrated were very active and powerful, and would organise strikes once in a while.

There was also the Indonesian Konfrontasi to contend with.

My school was, and still is, located next to the Sarawak Police Headquarters, and so our lessons would be interrupted to no end by the whirl and putter of helicopter propellers as heavy warring machines were brought in by air.

The streets were crawling with British and Ghurkha soldiers.

The simple joys of an era gone-by

There were elections then, with the newly formed parties beginning to assume prominence on the political stage.

The Sarawak United People's party (SUPP) was the most popular party in my neighbourhood at Jalan Ban Hock in Kuching.

Their public rallies would attract a sea of people, and these were very festive occasions.

In actual fact, the SUPP was penetrated by the Sarawak Communist Party and many of their leaders and cadres were detained under the ISA.

What with the armed insurgency and the ISA arrests, adults in my neighbourhood discussed politics only in whispers.

The one common thing we students shared in school was our material depravity.

Very few were those indeed who were driven to schools in motor cars.

Very few people could afford to buy a car. Those were the days when British made cars ruled the roads, the tiny Morris Minor, Vauxhall, and Ford. The Japanese cars would flood Malaysian roads only many years later.

Everybody walked or cycled to school, or took the bus.

A monthly bus pass would cost five dollars. During those bad old days, the cars and buses were not air-conditioned so they were not that comfortable.

There were no televisions, so the radio was our main outlet of entertainment. The programme where boys and girls could write in to request a Connie Francis or Elvis song to be played and dedicated to a friend was hugely popular.

The main entertainment attraction was the cinema. We kids saw every good movie that came to town.

The entrance fee was as low as 50 cents for the front seats. During weekends, the morning show cost only 30 cents. Sometimes, we had no money, we loitered at the entrance, waiting for an adult to take us in, a practice which was tolerated by the management. One such film that I saw was 'High Noon', starring Gary Cooper.

To finance our movie addiction, kids in the neighbourhood would collect bottles and oil tins.

No TV, internet and no computer games

A bottle could fetch one cent, while an oil tin could bring in a grand dollar. An old man on a rickety trishaw would come by once a week to collect these bottles and tins and that would make us rich.

I knew of no rich man or rich men's children.

My family was living on one hundred and fifty dollars sent by my father who was working in Brunei and thirty nine of these precious dollars had to go towards paying rent.

Most neighbours were those whom you would classify to-day as working class.

The civil servants and the teachers were the most respected members of the community.

Daily pocket money for children was meagre at best.

There was no television, no Internet, and no computer games.

Kids had ever heard of private tuition or art and dancing classes.

We boys looked for the odd stream in the jungle to swim and frolic, climbed trees for the fruits, and tried to catch some fish from the muddy drains alongside the roads.

There were endless number of games to engage our abundant energy, and I was happy.

Then, when we entered secondary schools, we played our games in earnest, football, hockey, rugby, basketball, badminton, table tennis, and athletics.

It was on the field that we forgot all about race and religion.

Our team mates were our partners on whom we had to depend and love for the success of our team.

Life-long friendships were fostered and sealed on the field. To us, politicians' talk about race was just talk, half a universe away.

In recent days, I have discussed this phenomenon with some old timers from West Malaysia.

They reported the same childhood experience in Ipoh, KL, and Penang, while lamenting that inter-racial goodwill has since disappeared into thin air after half a century of Merdeka.

Fortunately for Malaysia, excellent racial relation still thrives in Sabah and Sarawak.

Beauty wrecked by politics

Thirty percent of the marriages every year there are still those that leap across racial lines.

Over 50 years later, the physical, socio-economic, and political landscape has changed beyond recognition.

Many Malaysians to-day would still tell me that they love their country and that we are fortunate to be spared the kind of natural disasters that visits upon our neighbours every year.

We have plenty of sunshine and rainfall and a middle-class that is the envy of other countries in Asia, Africa, and South America.

They would say that Malaysia is the most beautiful country in the world wrecked by bad politics.

I concur.

I am not much a subscriber to the concept of patriotism and the nation-state in my sunset years.

If there is anything to celebrate for this year's Independence Day, it is this: the Malaysian people are by and large level headed, commonsensical, pretty honest and hardworking, and try to live a good life despite the conmen, the criminals and the bad politicians.

The canning sentence of a Malay woman for drinking beer and the protest of some Malay/Muslims over the relocation of a Hindu temple using a cow's head as a symbol of their hate is the exception rather than the rule.

With the exception of the May 13 incident, our experiment with democracy has stumbled and fumbled along with some degree of success.

Despite the agent provocateurs, the racist and religious incitement and a very imperfect electoral system, Malaysians are still prepared to settle their differences at the polls rather than resorting to mob rule.

I can only pray for a truly two coalition system to emerge in Malaysia in the foreseeable future so that our country will be on the sure path towards an open democratic society that delivers justice for all, irrespective of race and religion.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/111698>