

September 16: What it means to Malaysia's youth
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'916' was made famous by de-facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, with his "we have the numbers" takeover-caper in 2008 which is then subsequently used to colloquially represent the date, September 16.

But what is not so commonly talked about, especially among our youths, is that it is also the date that marks the real birthday of our Malaysia.

While we would normally celebrate our national day on Aug 31, that exact date is marked only by the independence of the peninsula (which was then re-named to 'Persekutuan Tanah Melayu').

Malaysia, in both name and form and as we know it today, only came about on Sept 16 1963. The addition of Sabah and Sarawak and Singapore playing the 'Chipsmore' role of 'here then, gone tomorrow' completed the jigsaw of what we are today.

As we wish Malaysia a very happy 46th birthday, Malaysiakini talked to some youths about what this date means to them and if they even know its real significance.

They were not around to remember what this date means and what happened then. Indeed, to most of them, the significance of Sep 16 lies hidden in the musty lessons of their schooling or the boorish recollections of elderly relations.

'I can use the extra day off'

So, it is not entirely surprising that for the most part, they are mainly concerned that it is not another public holiday.

Mark Lee, a senior programmer with a web development firm, said that he and his colleagues were just discussing about the matter a few days ago.

"Pity its not another holiday. I can use the extra day off", said the 24 year old who agreed that Sept 16 and Aug 31 are "both important" although he doesn't really know the how and why of the former.

To him, Sept 16 is apparently the "real independence day" though he admits that he does not really know the significance of Hari Malaysia.

Indeed, this is the general view amongst the youths Malaysiakini spoke to. To them the date is a wasted opportunity for a day off from work.

But refreshingly some of them know enough about history to be actually aware of what Sept 16 is really all about.

"Of course, it is Hari Malaysia", said Reza Rosli, 29 when asked about the date.

He is puzzled when informed that many people do not know of the significance of Sept 16, "how come they don't know?", he asked.

Though after asking around his office he admitted that apparently his peers were not aware of what he thinks is common knowledge.

To him, it is a part of our history that people should generally know and celebrate to acknowledge our brothers and sisters from Sabah and Sarawak for joining us in our Malaysia.

He thinks that we should celebrate Hari Malaysia as prominently as Hari Merdeka on Aug 31, and not treat it just like some "after party".

Reza who is also a businessman, told of how he once saw a set of maps that showed the evolution of Malaysia from a hundred years ago until now.

'The Malaysia that we know'

To him, nothing represents Sept 16 more than the evolution of shapes portraying our nation from the days of a bedraggled collection of colonies known as British Malaya to the familiar map "of 1963, of which we are the Malaysia that we know today".

But while he knows the history behind Sept 16 quite well, to Reza the greatest insult is that people do not know what should be general knowledge rather than any stronger motivation.

And like Mark, he also wished that Sept 16 is another public holiday.

28 year old Emmy Zuraihan, management trainee with a major plantations industry player, is more concerned with the fact that Hari Malaysia is not celebrated though she admitted she wasn't aware that it fell on Sept 16.

Emmy said that Sept 16, "was the day that Malaysia was born, and I care".

The management trainee said that we "should celebrate [Hari Malaysia] as a second National Day".

In fact, she added that we should have "awareness campaigns at schools, universities and work places as well as other media initiatives to remember Sept 16 as an important date and a public holiday".

'Important for present and future generations'

An avid reader of Malaysia's many blogs, she singled out Haris Ibrahim's 'Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia' initiative which she appreciates as being a good example of such a move. "We should care about it as it is important for present and future generations to get the facts of our history right".

Researcher Catalina Rembuyan was even more emotional about the issue. A Sarawakian living and working in Malaysia, she said that Sept 16 "is the real birthday of the country, the day when Sabah and Sarawak merged with Persekutuan Tanah Melayu to form Malaysia".

"Certainly we do see ourselves as Malaysians, but coming from a different history, with a different political climate, and separated by the South China Sea, Sarawakians view themselves as Malaysians in a way that is very different from how those in the Peninsular view

themselves as Malaysians", she said.

She explained, "for those in the Peninsular, the story of colonization, independence, and the development of race-based politics is THE story, and the histories of Sabah and Sarawak are tagged on as additional 'not so important' footnotes to the story".

'Symbolic gesture'

But she made it clear that "for those in Sarawak, the story of the Peninsular's journey to independence is just one of the many stories leading to the formation of Malaysia".

While she is concerned about the lack of celebrations, she is more worried about the "tremendous lack of knowledge from those living in the Peninsular on the issues affecting East Malaysia".

"To be frank, I would much rather see these issues resolved than to have Sept 16 acknowledged as a special day. Until these issues are really addressed and resolved, having any kind of celebrations on Sept 16 is a fairly meaningless gesture", said the Sarawak born researcher.

She concluded, "the issue of a symbolic gesture like celebrating Malaysia Day is not as important to me as solving the more pressing issues affecting Sarawak and its relationship with Malaysia".

While knowledge about Sept 16 and its significance seem to be shallow in certain quarters, in contrast to the detailed knowledge of some, it needs to be said that all those interviewed expressed their willingness to sign a petition to call for a nationwide celebration on Hari Malaysia.

Rather than just looking at it as another extra holiday, it is something to be proud of that our youths not only show sensitivities to our history but also a willingness to acknowledge and engage their brethren from Sabah and Sarawak, and vice versa.

So today, as we celebrate Malaysia's 46 years of shared existence, we can probably hope to see a brighter future for our nation as the newer generation seems more inclined not only to respect our history but also each other.

Even if their united stand seems mostly to originate from a unified want of an additional day off.

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