

Bersih 2.0 "bersih"ed me! — Lt Col (R) Aw Yong Tian Teck
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JULY 12 — As I headed for the LRT station to enter the city on the morning of July 9, I was both fearful and determined — fearful that a “May 13” type violence would erupt, and afraid of being arrested. Yet, I was determined to break this shroud of fear that had gained intensity over the last two weeks from reading the newspapers, watching television and listening to coffeeshop talk.

I nervously joined a predominantly Malay group outside the KTM building. From those whom I glanced at a bit longer, I received courteous smiles. I soon started to join them in shouting “Hidup Rakyat” or “Hidup Bersih” and punching the air as we strolled along. When they shouted calling upon “Allah”, I suddenly became conscious of the present controversy concerning the use of the word by non-Muslims, reducing my voice to a murmur.

As we approached Dataran Merdeka, our path was blocked by the police. We were told to sit down on the road, women and children included. Someone started singing, “Negara ku...” then we all joined in.

Despite my 27 years’ service in the nation’s Armed Forces, I never felt so close to Malaysia, my country as at that moment... then the dreadful bell on the top of the FRU vehicle rang, followed by what sounded like gun shots. They were firing tear gas into the crowd!

Completely unprepared and shocked, I was overcome by the painful and nauseating gas. We scrambled and I managed to move to a corner. A Malay man handed me bits of salt and others shared their water with me. The group retreated towards Dayabumi, and as I joined them, visibly shaken, I was frequently asked, “Uncle OK?” by smiling young Malay lads.

Our march through the Chinatown area was another eye opener. As we passed a Chinese eating shop, the crowd which by then included a number of non-Malays, waved invitingly to the customers asking them to, “Mari sama-sama!” At an Indian stall by the roadside, they crowded to buy water; a far cry from the violent, rioting mob that we were told to expect!

The way to Merdeka Stadium was blocked. As the now enlarged crowd retreated through the Chinatown area, we were again attacked by the FRU with tear gas. We scrambled and finally ended up in front of Puduraya, joining a much larger crowd with more non-Malays present. Once again, the police fired tear gas and shot their water cannon at the crowd.

The crowd then regrouped and headed towards KLCC. It was nearly an hour before the police finally came and did their “thing” again. By then, the “order” to “bersurai” was passed around; the rakyat had done their job!

In all, I spent about five hours marching with a largely predominantly Malay crowd. I was soaked and tear-gassed, but in the end I felt liberated, happy and grateful to God! Never have I seen the Malays so passionate about their cause, yet so gentle and mild-mannered under such trying conditions.

They were nowhere like the racially-incited, hate-ridden, property destroying “kumpulan jahat” that we were told to expect — definitely not in the crowd that I had the privilege to walk with that day!

The non-Malays who were there must be commended equally for their belief and conviction, and for their faith in a mature Malaysian society. The policemen whom I spoke to were surprisingly good-natured in spite of the long hours they had been on duty, some expressing concern for my safety. The order to fire tear gas at fellow Malaysians came from the top.

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