

Thank you, rakyat Malaysia — Kashini Krishnamurthy
The Malaysian Insider
July 14, 2011

JULY 14 — I grew up in one of those households that affirmed a specific stereotype for a specific race. The Chinese all stuck together, clannish is the word I think my family called them. The Malays had it easy with all the help it got from the government and that left us, the Indians to fend for ourselves (as it was a well known fact that Indians never really helped one another). I believed that despite being a Malaysian citizen, I was born into an unfortunate situation.

My mother constantly spoke about migration and how we had to go in search of a better life, one Malaysia could not secure for a middle class Indian family like ours.

Like every other Indian family, it began with studying abroad. But as much as I enjoyed the freedom of a foreign land, I always felt the pull of Malaysia and returned after a long stint away.

I never worried myself over our economy, our government, our political leaders. I grew up understanding that the odds were already stacked against me, that some things, despite my citizenship would just never be available to me. But that never stopped me from complaining.

From as soon as I could form my own thoughts, I've been complaining. Every hurdle I ever came across, I attributed to foul play or inequality of the Malaysian system. I considered myself nothing more but a victim of the system.

But the time finally came for me to stop complaining and pointing fingers and to do something about it. The tremendous momentum of the Bersih rally managed to even garner my-never-read-the-newspaper attention. There was this sudden uproar demanding justice, and I felt an overwhelming need to support it.

The ludicrous statements churned out by our prime minister made me foam at the mouth. How could they pull such dirty tricks at a national level and think they could get away with it? That must have been the moment I decided that an arrogant and bullish government was a government that didn't deserve to rule further and I was going to do everything in my little way to ensure it.

I told my mother that I had to attend the Bersih rally, and much to my surprise, she didn't try to stop me. She even packed me and my sister raincoats to keep the anticipated chemical-laced water from the water cannons off our skin.

I remember praying that morning. Apart from asking God to help me not get arrested, I prayed that this peaceful assembly would result in a new Malaysia, one that I could be proud of.

My sister, her friend and I made our way to the Pasar Seni station and were met with fear as we saw FRU trucks and countless men in uniform. The mood was tense and the lack of non-Malays made me nervous. I feared standing out like a sore thumb.

By 1pm, we had begun to march down Petaling Street. We immediately felt safe in a sea of what can only be described as a multiracial crowd of Malaysians. People were passing around flowers, snapping photographs and even blowing up balloons to toss around.

Photographers on rooftops summoned the crowd to look up and in turn we flashed our biggest smiles.

This street carnival atmosphere erased some of the tension that most of us had been feeling earlier, when we arrived at what appeared to be a ghost town of Kuala Lumpur. Fear was the furthest things from our mind as we sang "Bersih, bersih" to the tune of Ole-ole.

Due to a blockage at one of the streets leading up to Stadium Merdeka, we made our way instead towards Menara Maybank. This is where I witnessed a whole new Malaysia. Malays, Chinese and Indians were smiling, laughing, waving at people in the LRTs together. No one uttered curse words, no one showed the FRU the finger (I checked when a police helicopter flew by) and no one seemed inclined to any kind of violence, except for the FRU that is. That precise moment of Malaysian harmony at its finest was met by canisters of tear gas and so began what has become a truly historic day.

My sister, her friend and I clutched each other tightly and ran for our lives. There are no words to describe the fear of being attacked by your own police. The protectors of our country, the defenders of the weak were hell bent on hurting little ol' unarmed me.

Once we had been cornered at Jalan Pudu, I started to worry. This was all getting too dangerous for my liking and as fate would have it, we could see no possible exit strategy. A cloud of tear gas engulfed me, each breath like needles into my nose, throat and worst of all lungs. I clutched on to my sister's backpack as we summoned ourselves to run blindly out of harm's way.

I could barely open my eyes and my heart raced like it was about to explode. I felt nauseous and dizzy all at once, I could barely stand upright let alone sprint anymore when it began to rain heavily, soaking us all while washing remnants of the tear gas off our burning skin.

We ran into what appeared to be an open space next to the Tung Shin Hospital. As I gasped for oxygen, I was met with the sincere concern of other rally participants, all offering water and salt to minimise the effects of the hazardous gas.

I remember what I saw then very clearly (despite the tears running down my cheek) as it has changed my mind of Malaysia. Malaysians were sharing water, salt and towels. Malaysians were helpful and considerate. Malaysians were praying together for the violence to cease.

Choked with emotion and lungs still hurting from the tear gas, we were on the run again. In the distance I could see the FRU charging at us, batons waving threateningly in the air. We were now faced with a 12-foot wall. This was no ordinary wall, it was red earth cut at an almost 90 degree angle. There was no way to climb this wall unless you possessed the acrobatic skills of a Chinese circus artiste.

But a group of Malay men had made a hole in the fence of the neighbouring Chinese school and in an orderly fashion were pulling people up over the wall. I waited patiently (despite the horrid yelling of the FRU behind me) for my turn as a kind gentleman summoned the strength of the gods to single handedly pull me to safety. Before I knew it, my sister and her friend were over the ledge too as more tear gas canisters exploded around us.

Out of sheer instinct, your body only knows to run. So run we did. We followed the crowd to what was another hole in a fence, this time down a slippery slope. A Chinese

man and a Malay man held their hands out for me to trek down carefully, yet again, all in an orderly fashion. I held on to anyone who was within reach for balance and offered the same for the ones trapped behind me. The barbed wires of the fence ate into the flesh of a Malay man that held the opening for us to pass and seemed unfazed by the fact the the FRU was so close. It was clear that he was leaving no Malaysian behind.

As I made my way through the broken fence, a young Malay boy whispered, "Ingat BN saja boleh buat jalan, kita pun boleh buat jalan" and winked at me. I laughed. With the FRU hot on our trail, I managed to savour the moment, just stand there and laugh. Then we started to run again.

Now that the burn of the tear gas has left my body, and the ache of the chase is long gone, what remains fresh in my mind is the spirit of unity Malaysians showed me. Our solidarity was undeniable.

To see the lies reported in the newspapers makes me mad but gives me hope to believe that maybe everything else I've read in the news before this were lies too. After all I did not see clannish Chinese, easygoing Malays or selfish Indians, I only saw Malaysians, eager for peace and justice.

I would like to thank that very kind Malay gentleman who hauled me up almost 12 feet. I wish I had taken the moment to look you in the eye and thank you for being the Malaysian we should all aspire to be.

July 9, 2011 is the day when I finally stopped being an Indian in Malaysia. I am now proud to be simply a Malaysian.

Copyright © 2011 The Malaysian Insider.

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/thank-you-rakyat-malaysia-kashini-krishnamurthy>