

**Malaysia : A Nation Divided**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
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**By Thomas Fann**

KUALA LUMPUR, May 3 — It's all there for us to see. Images of policemen beating up the protesters, of a police car being attacked and overturned by protesters, of barrages of tear gas and chemical-laced water cannons being fired onto the crowd. What started off as a peaceful protest ended in madness. These are some of the scenes of Bersih 3.0 on 28th April, 2012, scenes that many have not seen for over 40 years in Malaysia. We are not used to and find it very disturbing.

Freedom still eludes us

We held our own peaceful assembly in our city of Johor Bahru and it was a resounding success with no major incidents. But our jubilation was tempered by news of tear gas and water cannons being unleashed on our fellow protesters in KL. As more news and images of violence came out, our hearts sank. Why? Why was it necessary to deal with your own people in such manner? What grave crimes have they committed?

Hundreds of thousands of ordinary folks from all walks of life came together for a peaceful sit-down protest for free and fair election on the Dataran Merdeka, a square chosen for its symbolism, for it was here that the Union Jack was lowered and the Malayan flag was raised for the first time at 12.01am on 31st August 1957. We celebrated our freedom from our colonial master, the British, that fateful midnight but 54 years on, it seems freedom still eludes us.

Too much hatred

There are many acts of violence that day, especially by the police, that shook me but the one that really hit me hardest was not what I saw in KL but what I was told that evening in JB. My family and I went out for dinner at a restaurant we frequent and as I was settling my bill at the cashier counter, I was showing the owner photos of our JB protest. Another customer, an elderly man, peeked over my shoulder and said, "All these people ought to be SHOT!" I was too stunned to retort, nor should I.

It is just too grievous to think that we have come to this point where we would want to kill someone just because they don't share our views. It wasn't an isolated incident either for when we were out distributing flyers to promote our event, we could sense the hostility of some people. Some called us "Bodoh (Stupid)", others glared angrily at us. One even called the police to stop us and the police responded in quick time. If only the same players had been as civic and prompt when it comes to crime, JB would have been a safer place.

There is just too much hatred in our nation today and what happened on 28/4 in KL would only serve to fuel the hatred further. We are a nation divided and we should all be concerned.

An angry and divided nation

In the aftermath of the KL protest, the expected blame game has begun with the government putting the blame squarely on the organisers of Bersih 3.0 and portraying an opposition leader and his deputy as the instigators of the breach of the Dataran and thus the violence which follows. The organisers on the other hand blamed the police for losing control of themselves and attacked the protesters. In the midst of all this blaming, a voice of reason from a most unexpected quarter spoke up. Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, the deputy higher education minister and also UMNO supreme council member opined that the violent and chaotic scenes at the Bersih 3.0 rally pointed to an angry and divided nation and that the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) must take special care in addressing it. I say, not just the BN but all of us need to address it.

There's a lot of angry people on both sides of the divide. When I took part in Bersih 2.0 in KL last year, I saw anger in the eyes of policemen towards me and other protesters. It was almost as if those eyes were saying to us, "You filthy traitors, you are a bunch of ungrateful people who are just out to tarnish the good image of our country and stupid enough to be used by politicians for their own ends. We are going to get you!" If you care to trawl the Internet, on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, you'd find no lack of hateful comments about people who took part in the protest.

We are not the enemy

Yet we are just ordinary citizens, and most of us don't even belong to any political party. We definitely see ourselves as loyal, law-abiding and patriotic citizens. How else do you explain us? All of us overcame our fears, many travelled long distances and spent our own money to be at Bersih 3.0. We came with flowers and balloons hoping for a peaceful rally but also with salt and water just in case it wasn't peaceful. We ask for reforms that would make our electoral process better. We do this because we still believe in the ballot box. God help us all if we stopped believing. We should be commended, not assaulted. We are not the enemy, we are the rakyat of Malaysia and we just want to have a say in our future without having our voices silenced or stolen. Why should we be hated for loving our country enough to literally risk our lives for it?

Harbouring hatred

Let us just be honest and ask ourselves. Do we harbour hatred towards the police and their masters? Do the videos of gangs of policemen beating up hapless protesters who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time make our blood boil? You have to be dead or so full of hate towards the victims not to feel outraged. There was a lot of anger on the streets that day and it seems to me, the anger only grew with each act of aggression, whether it is from the police or from the protesters.

Hold our horses

Whichever side we belong to, let us hold our horses. Hatred destroys not just the object of our hate but also us. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind." We need to consciously and deliberately hold back our anger at those who have hurt us or our fellow protesters. We need to draw deep into our soul to find forgiveness and even love for those we perceive as enemies of our cause. We must not let ourselves descend into the abyss of hatred for it is a dark place where we can no longer see right from wrong anymore.

We need to ask ourselves why we as a nation have become so divided when after 54 years of nation-building, we should be more united and integrated. What are the issues that divide

us? It cannot be the issues raised by Bersih 3.0. The call for a free and fair election, for the end to corruption and to dirty politics should unite all decent Malaysians. Yet, these issues are drowned out deliberately by those who oppose the demands of Bersih. Who is the real enemy of the Rakyat?

Like the tear gas they fired, they politicised, sensitised, distorted and outrightly lied about the issues so that they can hide behind the smoke hoping to make their escape from justice. The real enemy of our nation are those that sow discord among us so that they can continue to plunder our common wealth.

Truth always prevails

We have to counter lies with truth and hate with love. If we believe our cause is righteous, then our acts must also be. No matter how tempted we are to descend into anger and hatred, let us hold ourselves and each other back by extending forgiveness to those who have hurt us for indeed many know not what they are doing. Let us unite together against our common enemies - deception, corruption, indecency, poverty and division. Let us hold on to the truth, for truth always prevail just as light always overcome darkness no matter how overwhelming the darkness may be. In short, let's always do what is right.

Evermore so, let the words of our national anthem, Negaraku, be our prayer at this juncture in our nation's history.

Negaraku, Tanah Tumpahnya Darahku, (My country, the land where my blood is shed)  
Rakyat Hidup, Bersatu dan Maju, (The people live united and progressive)  
Rahmat Bahagia, Tuhan Kurniakan, (May God grant us blessings of happiness)  
Raja Kita, Selamat Bertakhta. (Our King may reign in peace)

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