

**Why my father, an ordinary man, took to the streets during the elections**  
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My father is a Malaysian citizen. At least, that is what his identity card (IC) says.

But ask him what it means to be a Malaysian citizen — and he will probably say, “I don’t know.”

My father is an ordinary man. He was born in Kuala Lumpur, raised in Pahang, completed his high school education at St John's Institution, KL, and then left to study accountancy in the United Kingdom.

Growing up in a family where political commentary was the norm at dinner, I used to ask my dad, “Why didn’t you just settle in the UK? Then we wouldn’t have to deal with this messed up system!”

His answer, “I don’t know. Family. Plus Malaysia today isn’t the same as it was back in the 1980s. The economy was booming then and prospects were good.”

However, over the years, as I learned about the sacking of Tun Salleh Abbas and the forced resignation of Tan Sri Ani Arope, I would tell my father, “Your generation let us down. You allowed the politicians to plunder our institutions.”

My dad would retort with a smirk, “What should I have done then? Take to the streets?”

Still, I would argue that my father’s generation failed as citizens. Because citizenship necessitates participation. But with the baby boomers, participation seemed like it was left to the fringe few who were bold enough to believe they could effect change.

Then came the 2008 tsunami, the Bersih movement and the recent general election.

And something changed.

It started because I volunteered to be an election observer. When my dad found out, he signed up too (as did my mum but her application was rejected). In fact, my dad even signed up to be a long-term observer, which means being on duty from the start of the campaign to the final tally.

And it was during this period that I saw my father take on a civic responsibility which was hitherto alien to our middle-class, English-speaking family. On nomination day, he arrived at the centre well before time, took down the necessary notes and duly reported his observations.

Every day, he would go to the various ceramahs in Lembah Pantai (the constituency we had been assigned to) and every day he would come back and fill out the observer forms diligently.

Bear in mind that my father, who had studied entirely in English, was not fluent in Bahasa Malaysia.

Every day, he would look up where Nurul Izzah Anwar and Datuk Raja Nong Chik Zainal Abidin were going to be campaigning (the latter hardly had speaking events though) and he would map his route accordingly. Rain or shine, even if we were at a function or visiting relatives, my dad would excuse himself in order to catch at least one campaign event for his log.

My father may have grown up in KL but during the elections he visited parts of the city we never even knew existed — the Malay heartland areas of Abdullah Hukum, Taman Sri Sentosa, Kampung Kerinchi, etc.

But there he was with his “PEMERHATI” badge every night for more than two weeks, snapping pictures, counting the number of attendees, listening to speeches and taking down notes.

On voting day, my dad studied the voting procedures carefully and went about doing the job he had been assigned to do. No fuss, no complaints.

I cannot figure out why my dad displayed so much gusto as an observer when even I found the role fairly mundane after a while. Perhaps it was the cheering-on he received from his golf buddies.

Nevertheless, once the elections were over, I asked my father why he volunteered. He said, “My generation was happy to accept half-truths. But it’s intriguing to see your generation fighting back... I felt like I needed to support that.”

Observing the elections isn’t much at all in the larger scheme of things.

But as Malaysia grows, so does her citizens.

My father is an ordinary man. An ordinary man who, for the first time ever, chose to participate. — September 13, 2013.

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