

In Malaysia, Sarawakians look for a fairer deal
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BY DESMOND DAVIDSON

Only three years ago and 47 years after the formation of Malaysia did the 2.4 million people of Sarawak, together with those in Sabah and the peninsula, mark the birth of the country on a national scale.

This year will be the fourth such celebration. But how do Sarawakians feel about what should arguably be the country's most important national event?

"There's something lacking. I've never felt the spirit of Malaysia Day," was 50-year-old paraplegic Josh John's reply to The Malaysian Insider in Sarawak's capital city, Kuching.

To this former accountant, who lives in the city's Batu Kawa suburb, every Malaysia Day is "just another holiday".

John (pic) attributed the lack of feeling for Malaysia Day to the government's failure to emphasise how important it is.

"To this day, the government still places emphasis on the importance of Malaya's independence from the British rather than the historically more significant event – the birth of the country.

"So what do I think of Malaysia Day? Not much," said the father of one, who became wheelchair bound after suffering a viral attack to his spinal column that left him paralysed 17 years ago.

Violet Yong, a DAP assemblywoman, also cannot understand why Hari Merdeka continues to be more important than Malaysia Day.

"Why is August 31, the Malaya independence day and which has nothing to do with Sabah and Sarawak, an event still more important than Malaysia Day?" she asked.

"The emphasis should be on September 16 rather than August 31," she said.

The Pending assemblyman also feels the lack of awareness about Malaysia's formation among the people of Sarawak is due to what is being taught in school.

"The formation of Malaysia is not correctly taught in our schools," she said, urging the government to have a re-look at school history textbooks.

Yong believes not much emphasis is given to the formation of Malaysia there and it is reflected in the schoolchildren's thinking.

"After 50 years of Malaysia, what have we got? People, particularly the younger generation, are still confused about Malaysia Day. They all think Malaysia Day is on August 31," said the two-term assemblywoman.

Yong's opinion seemed to be right on the money when we talked to Melissa Crocker, a 33-year-old public relations officer, and Layla Jane, a 34-year-old online entrepreneur.

Crocker said she was "confused" by all the dates and the celebrations while Jane said she "never thought about it (Malaysia Day)".

The dates Crocker was referring to are July 22, August 31 and September 16.

July 22 is Sarawak's Independence Day which was marked by the state for the first time this year.

"(Malaysia Day! I thought you were referring to the event of August 31. Now I really don't know.

"My only understanding of Malaysia Day is when Sabah and Sarawak joined Malaya to form Malaysia. And that again is something I didn't learn in school.

"So forgive me, because apart from that, there is little I know of the significance of the formation of Malaysia.

"Hari Merdeka on August 31 is the real deal!"

Crocker said since she has little idea of the historical significance of Malaysia Day, the government should take steps to create better awareness of Malaysia Day and make it more significant.

Layla Jane, 30, is an online entrepreneur. - September 14, 2013. Layla Jane, 30, is an online entrepreneur. - September 14, 2013. "Now so insignificant. Don't feel Malaysia Day," she said.

Jane, too, said she was never taught about the formation of Malaysia when she was in school.

"All of us only know about Hari Merdeka," she said. "So that's why I never gave much thought to Malaysia Day.

"So if you were to ask me about Merdeka Day, I can talk to you a lot about it. But if you ask me about Malaysia Day, I'm sorry I can't."

Yong said Malaysia Day was important day to her and her DAP colleagues and supporters as it was a culmination of their efforts in pushing the government to recognise the historical importance of the day.

"I personally am excited by Malaysia Day. It is an important day. It is the day Malaysia was born."

That excitement, Yong said, is a little tempered by what she believes, that the government's decision to start marking Malaysia Day three years ago was a political gimmick.

"The government has not done much to elevate the importance of Malaysia Day."

Baharuddin Mokshen, a senior Parti Keadilan Rakyat state leader, agreed with Yong.

"It was only to pacify the people of Sabah and Sarawak," he said.

"I feel the government gave this Malaysia Day as a token to smother the simmering flame of potential separatism.

"I personally have no sense of feeling for Malaysia Day because the government failed to make it an important date.

"It's just another holiday," he said, a line that is now a well-echoed sentiment.

Another bone of contention to both Yong and Baharuddin as they view Malaysia Day is the unequal development accorded to Sarawak.

"How can we really joyfully mark Malaysia Day when we lag so far in development compared to the states in the peninsula?"

That, Baharuddin pointed out, has now fostered talk of separation, and not only in Sarawak.

"On the Internet, people are talking and asking if Sarawak is better off as an independent state."

Datuk Amar James Wong, one of the state's forefathers of Malaysia, wrote in his book, *The Birth of Malaysia*, that one of the factors that was on their minds when they were toying with the idea of federation was that Sarawak, in the late 1950s, was not a rich country and "seemed to have a low economic potential".

He stated that Sarawak's revenue in 1959 was a mere RM67million.

"In short, we were not then a rich country with great potential."

Fifty years on, with its timber exports and the lucrative oil and gas, Sarawak is one of the biggest contributors to the national coffers.

Baharuddin said the development funds received by Sarawak does not reflect its contribution to the national economy.

"Just look at our Pan-Borneo Highway. After nearly two decades of begging, the road that's supposed to be the state's economic lifeline is still a third-class road," he said.

Equality is what Yong is hoping for too.

"That's my one wish. For all Malaysians to come together and celebrate Malaysia Day in true fairness and as equals.

"At the moment this is not happening. We are still lagging behind in all forms of development despite the fact that Sarawak is contributing much to the national coffers." - September 14, 2013.

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