By Ki Rei

“Complain, complain…no use one lah, just vote them out!”, was my usual retort in Manglish to anyone voicing his or her dissatisfaction with the corruption and injustice in our beloved country.

That was my standard reply and thoughts for many years. I believed my vote was the singular most precious and powerful possession I have as a Malaysian. It was also the only thing given equally to every Malaysian.

But all that was until just before Bersih 2.0. The unfolding of events just before Bersih 2.0, the racist remarks made by a certain “leader”, the intimidation and threat on those planning to join Bersih, the gutter political play of national security and fear sentiments… they woke me up, made me more determined that I could no longer sit in front of my TV fuming over those “ridiculous” things happening around me or even laugh over some non-sensible political statements.

It was, like, I was woken up because I was the kind of person who is *pantang dicabar*. The final awakening was my realisation that Bersih 2.0 was not just a mass protest, but involved me fighting to get back my ballot paper that has been treated as and turned into no more than a piece of toilet paper!

My cast vote had been tampered. There was no longer any sanctity to my effort and other Malaysians’ effort of casting vote dutifully and faithfully all these years. I also realised Bersih was about fighting for my fundamental right, to regain my and others’ belongings - ballot papers.

All my so-called good citizen’s acts all these years of never giving a single cent as bribery to the police for any traffic offence committed was no longer sufficient. It had become a self-righteous act which does not have the power to change things for the better. My act of never letting others bribe my worth had to take a step further into turning that worth into action – on the street. I had no other option. I had been pushed to the corner. Or, rather, to the forefront.

Fear. It was real. I did not claim to be a hero and fearless the moment after I had decided to go to Bersih2.0. The determination in having to do something more than a self-righteous act, surprisingly, gave me the courage.

My personal experience of “being” in a street protest by default when having a holiday overseas gave me that extra boost of courage. I remembered walking on a street in a business district in Seoul when suddenly I saw men in all-white attire and white headbands, probably hundreds of them, marching and chanting. Police or army personnel, I couldn’t tell, all armed with shields and batons, were lined up on both sides of the road. They were stationary and in neat lines.

Before fear could creep in, I was shocked by the fact that many other normal citizens, many in business suits – neat neck-ties and blazers – were walking nonchalantly. As if it was a normal, day-to-day scene. Some just took a glance as they walked, some looked intently as they walked and some stopped to look. No one showed any fearful reaction.

“That’s it!”, suddenly I told myself, “this is something not to be missed, man! Where on earth can I get to see this kind of scene in Malaysia?!”

I immediately made my way to stand right beside the police personnel and took some pictures like a Japanese tourist. I managed to take a close, good look at their shields and their stern facial experience, just like in any other army parade. I did not have to speak Korean to know it was a street protest but I was curious to know what kind of protest. I immediately asked a man

in neat working attire who was standing beside me who told me it was a protest on some labour law.

That experience in Seoul really came alive the moment I decided to go for Bersih 2.0. It was an experience that told me that a street protest is not a fearful thing. It is a way people voice out their grievances because their earlier cry for cooperation and help went unheeded and all other possible avenues taken were not effective.

My experience with fellow Malaysians that day during Bersih 2.0 was not fearful at all. It was a touching experience because for once, my hope for a truly Malaysian Malaysia was rekindled. The unity among all, helping each other out where the colours of race and faith turned into one Bersih yellow colour; and the singing of NegaraKu were simply touching. Many times tears welled in my eyes as I walked on Petaling Street trying to make our way to the blocked Stadium Negara. That very tears that used to well in my eyes and flowed down my cheeks whenever I prayed for our nation were just tears of joy now.

But I have to confess that I was and am still fearful of the tear gas that attacked me on Bersih 2.0 day. That painful sensation in my eyes and choking gas that made breathing a struggle at one point… I thought I was going to heaven soon… only to realise it was such a liberating experience at the end of Bersih 2.0. Liberating that I have finally sent a strong message of my worth on that piece of ballot paper with many other Malaysians.

From fear to liberation to courage... for Bersih 3.0. See you this Saturday, Malaysians!

p/s: Ki Rei □きれい□, by the way, means clean or beautiful in Japanese...