



By Farish A Noor

WHEN I was a kid growing up in Malaysia, I, like millions of other kids at school, was compelled to sing the national anthem “Negaraku”. The words were learned by rote, memorised and repeated in a repetitive fashion during the morning assembly as the national flag was raised.

Being brought up a Johannian at St John's Institution, this ritual was drilled into us on a weekly basis; and later on when I became a prefect I also had to learn the other rites and rituals of mutuality and association: Brushing and polishing my shoes till they were so shiny that one could see one's face reflected; brushing and cutting one's hair tight and above the ears, the incessant marching and drilling that rendered our lives routine and regimented — very much like cadets in an army camp.

Though we detested these rituals then, they were nonetheless the means through which citizenship and belonging were instilled in us. But like those novels that you read when you were young, and never fully understood till you returned to them years later, the meaning of the national anthem never dawned upon me until many years later, when I found myself living abroad in Europe for 21 years.

I have, since the age of 18, lived the life of a minority. In England, France, Holland, Germany and now in Singapore, I have always been counted as one among the minority groups. I was either of a minority ethnic background or religion, or both.

And during those years of constant movement my itinerant life has meant that the only things that reminded me of Malaysia were those that held some tactile, tangible memory in my mind: My old school St John's, and my mother. These are the only things that keep me attached to Malaysia, two umbilical chords — one concrete and one physical, though now severed and yet symbolically real. I carried with me, during all those years of study and work, a living memory of Malaysia that remains with me until today.

My memory of school — St John's in the 1970s and 1980s — was one that offered a glimpse of another Malaysia that may have come to pass, a Malaysia where all of us, Johannians, were of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and yet were bound together by a common sense of Malaysian-ness, and until today whenever my school chums and I meet (we are all balding now, with pot bellies being dutifully cultivated along with bad knees, weak eyesight and failing nerves) we recall the days when ours was a school that was a microcosm of Malaysia.

Not that our nostalgia for the past is blinding, or that we would deny that there was, even then, the traces of sectarianism that was budding in our midst. But one cannot help but look back to that past and ask how and why the nation we grew up in has changed so much in so short a space of time.

My memories of childhood include the recurring memory of the evenings on the swing in our garden in the house in Ampang, where I would look at the sea of stars in the sky at night (in those days you could actually see stars in the sky at night as KL was not so lighted), and listening to her talking about the past; about the Japanese invasion, about the colonial era when she had to sing "God Save The King", and the story of how she cried when she sang "Negaraku" for the first time in 1957.

That a song could elicit tears was a novel idea for me, for it was the same song being drummed into us at school at St John's on a daily basis. But two decades on as I braved the hostile winters of London, Paris, Leiden and Berlin that memory returned to me again and again. Like a novel that one returns to years after reading it the first time, upon a second reading new meanings are suddenly laid bare. Could it be that I was, after all, a patriot?

The question pricked at the heart of my secular-liberal conscience for my education, tempered by a decade of student activism and unionism, had taught me that nationalism was always a potentially dangerous thing. And having spent the past two decades studying political violence and religious extremism, I would have to concur. I have seen enough instances of hyper-nationalism to make my blood freeze and my skin crawl. I have had the dubious honour of meeting and interviewing hyper-nationalists, religious extremists, terrorist fanatics and frankly I have grown weary and wary of those who confess their beliefs in too emotional and simplistic a manner. I fear hyper-nationalism as it always requires an enemy to define itself, to frame itself in positive terms.

And until today I fear demagogues and ideologues who proclaim that their nation is the best, better than others.

In the course of my travels I have met many of such characters (dare I say it, more than any of you, dear readers) and I am repulsed by even the slightest hint of communitarianism and exclusive politics.

But once I was struck by my own emotional reaction when I watched a crowd of hyper-nationalists from a neighbouring country burn the Malaysian flag before my eyes. It was an odd moment, when a feeling of great emotion overwhelmed me. There is no word to signify the feeling I felt, though the emotion was raw and complex; a mixture of profound anger and disgust, co-mingled by a deep abiding sadness, as if a part of me had been burned too.

The same feeling visits me time and again when, in the course of my work as a wandering academic, I meet other academic colleagues and scholars who occasionally let slip the odd jibe like “Well, what do you expect? That’s Malaysian politics for you!” The sniggers and laughter that follow sting my conscience deep inside, for I am torn between having to accept the superficial truth value of what they say, and my steadfast refusal to let it remain so. In my heart of hearts, I can only say to myself: “No, that is not how Malaysian politics should be, and we are better than that, and we can be better than that.”

I retreat to the hollow comfort of nostalgia and embrace the memory that Malaysia once had one of the best civil services in the world, the best university in Southeast Asia, the most professional armed forces. I cling on to the memory that this country was once led by men and women of integrity — and as a historian I can recount many stories of exemplary dedication, moral courage, honesty and integrity.

I have been told stories of how the leaders of our country once refused luxury expenses, paid their own hotel bills even when on diplomatic missions, kept an eye on their personal accounts. My late Uncle Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin was one of those who volunteered to be taken as a

hostage on a hijacked airliner, so that innocent lives of other passengers could be saved.

Malaysia was built on that, on the silent labour of an army of quiet patriots. And they were men who did not think that Malaysia was superior to other countries, who did not need to invent enemies to have a sense of self-worth.

Malaysia has just passed a threshold at its 13th general election and the mood in the country is electric. I do not know what may or will happen next. But what is clear is that differences in our nation have become divisions, and these divisions need to be healed if the nation is to move on. Both sides are accusing each other of betrayal, both sides are claiming the mantle of victimhood and both sides are lamenting our loss of innocence.

I simply wish to remind all of us, Malaysians of the same national family, that we are all citizens of the same nation — negaraku. Our nation has to come to terms with the fact that we are a complex family, with many different viewpoints.

Unity and homogeneity are not the same thing, and in our desire to see a united nation let us accept the fact that we have to also accept our differences.

This simple recognition of the inherent plurality and diversity is a fundamental fact of life, and cannot be overcome by a flattening of Malaysian society into a singular, homogenous Malaysian subjectivity. Nor can it ever succeed for no nation has prospered under such conditions. Our greatest asset, in my opinion, is precisely that diversity that prepares us for the complex world beyond our shores, making us global citizens even without the benefit of travelling.

Tonight I watched a video of tens of thousands of Malaysians singing “Negaraku”. Once again, I returned to the anthem of my youth, and found a new meaning to it. It taught me that despite our differences, we all love this country that is our home.

When Malaysians sang “Negaraku” together tonight, it was not because they felt that theirs was a superior country. It was not sung in the spirit of jingoism or bellicosity. It was sung out of a simple, sincere love for a nation that we call home, for we have no other. I have lived abroad for 27 years of my life, but tonight from the confines of my study in my academic’s flat in NTU, I was brought home for a while. I was brought back to that Malaysia that was born in the midst of a Cold War, in the midst of uncertainty and existential angst, and a Malaysia that was saved only because Malaysians loved it so.

Yes, we differ; and we defend the right to differ. Yes, we are diverse and we cannot help being

so. Malaysia is big enough for 30 million hearts to share. For we are, above all, Malaysians and whatever our ideological, ethnic and religious differences may be, there can be only one home for all of us: Negaraku.

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