

## Beyond gold medals

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won our first Olympic silver or gold. Fifty-one years ago, the British threw a bunch of people together, told us we were now a nation, gave us a piece of paper, told us these were our laws, placed people they could trust (to take care of their interests) in charge, then told us, in all our bewilderment, that we were now on our own, independent. Then they said their *sayonaras*.

Huddled in the middle of Southeast Asia, we were lost, scared and confused. What did independence mean? But then slowly, we started to build things, create things. And today, 51 years later, we were close to scoring a gold medal in the Olympics, baby!

The streets were starting to fill up again as dad and I headed back home. Yet amid the drizzle and hoorahs still ringing in my ears, I couldn't help but feel a sense of - for lack of a better term - Malaysianness. It was a strange feeling as I'd never felt particularly invested in this country.

Perhaps this has something to do with our education system. In our *karangans*, the standard solution to almost any problem has to involve the *kerajaan* - the *kerajaan* needing to introduce some programme or the *kerajaan* needing to step up enforcement. We are never taught to ask: what is my place in this country?, never taught to understand the concept of stakeholder. Only instructed to be grateful.

August 15th 2008, almost 7pm. As I looked back at the electronics store, something stirred within me, a feeling of wanting to jump and scream for joy. But why? It was as if I myself had won that semi-final.

I don't think I've completely figured out why I felt the way I did that evening, but I think the answer lies somewhere between the craziness of sitting with a bunch of strangers cheering for another stranger and quite possibly the potential I see for the country through the glory of Malaysian badminton. What does that even mean?

Well, the first part is easy - sports has the amazing ability to unite people. There we were, cheering together, booing together, rooting for this man simply because he was Malaysian. I suppose the informality and casualness of the whole situation was also distinctively Malaysian. Electronics store cum outdoor theatre?

The second part was a little harder to figure out. Initially, it was just a sense of pride that this time the guy who made it was one of us, someone who grew up here and whose coach also grew up here. Not some Malaysian-born, Singaporean-bred, Australian-educated American, but a Malaysian-born, Malaysian-bred, Malaysian-trained Malaysian.

But to venture a little deeper, I've always surmised that all problems in Malaysia can be narrowed down to race. Our institutions have progressively withered because we play the racial card too often. Everything here is about racial politics, racial school systems, racial businesses, racial *amanah saham* allocations, racial organisations, racial scholarships, racial promotions, racial demotions. Sometimes, you can't help but feel so alone because of all this divisiveness.

But our badminton team still kicks ass. And that's because the best players get picked regardless of race. We've had badminton greats of different races - Chong Wei, Rashid Sidek, Punch Gunalan. Nobody really cared about their ethnicity.

That night for a brief hour or so, we all took our race goggles off. We just wanted him to win. And I suppose we also wanted a public holiday. And even though we ended up settling for a silver in the end, for a brief hour or so on that traffic-less Friday evening, I saw the kind of country I wanted to invest and be invested in. And I knew in my heart that if we cared enough, we could achieve a lot more than just gold medals.

# Hidup Merdeka!

BY TUNKU 'ABIDIN MUHRIZ

THE *khutbah* on Friday, Aug 26 at Masjid Yam Tuan Raden in Kuala Pilah remarked how lucky we are this year that Merdeka coincides with Hari Raya Aidilfitri. Indeed, the congregation was told, this provides an opportunity for us to better understand the meaning of Merdeka, in relation to each other, in relation to our country, and in our relationship with God. The oratory continued: despite over five centuries of colonialism (I wonder how the speaker defined this term, which as I have stated before should be understood with certain caveats, and also to varying degrees given the varied histories of the politics that now make up our country), Islam managed to thrive, securing its place as the official religion of the Federation of Malaya. This neat narrative could be subject to much scrutiny. For instance, our forebears' understanding of the religion was certainly not identical to the way in which many of their descendants understand it. Many also forget (or never knew in the first place) the initial disagreements about whether an official religion should be defined in the Federal Constitution at all, and the role the Reid Commission played in this matter.

Academic contention aside, we are indeed fortunate that Merdeka this time coincides with the *Raya* celebrations. The hampers uniquely contain brilliant little cakes with the image of *Bapa Kemerdekaan* with his raised hand, and the colours of the *Jalur Gemilang* are more prominent than usual. (We at IDEAS succumbed to the same trend, with red, yellow and blue featuring lavishly in our *Raya* card.) Others are more excited about the long holiday, which some employers have extended even further.

The synchronisation has augmented many people's plans for Malaysia Day, it would seem. Certainly the official recognition of Malaysia Day as a federal holiday has made it legitimate for anyone to celebrate it without fear of being accused of excessive nationalistic fervour, and the orgy of Malaysia-themed documentaries

and specials on Astro channels in the run-up to the pair of patriotic days has apparently become an annual event. Many from Sabah and Sarawak understandably use the opportunity to highlight particular aspects of their territories.

All of this is a lot of fun and provides opportunities for fruitful discussion - indeed we at IDEAS are participating for a second time in the Malaysia Day Celebrations hosted by Bangkok Row in Bangsar - but this idea of celebrating both days ostentatiously is not necessarily reflective of our Founding Fathers' intentions, since there is a view that they themselves intended Aug 31 to represent both Merdeka and Malaysia Day. This is because the only reason that Malaysia Day did not originally fall on Aug 31, 1963 was to await the completion of the United Nations mission to verify the wishes of the people of Sabah and Sarawak, an act that still did not assuage the objections of neighbouring countries that regarded the formation of Malaysia as an affront to their sovereignty. What the *Tuns* and the Tunku could not have foreseen is how peninsula-centric the country's politics would become, thus necessitating the designation of a new holiday decades later to re-include them into the national story. Or perhaps they were just cautious of the economic impact of having too many public holidays.

Those debates have been long forgotten, however, replaced by much more depressing and potentially violent political contests that have consumed so many aspects of life in our country. While ever-maturing civil society (though it's important to note that some constituents in civil society are permanently stunted) does its best to bring people together to fight through the political encumbrance, many politicians themselves seem confused as to whom to court. Typically they hedge their bets, but it's always the case that the more violent ones get more currency (at least, in some of the media and amongst special interest groups) than the moderate ones, and it's one of the many sad indictments of how polarised our country has become.

It is because of this realisation that so many

amongst our compatriots are so pessimistic about the future. When those of us who are more optimistic remind them that Merdeka itself was once a pipedream - look at the confluence of politicians and civil society then! - they will reply that at least the different communities could jointly state a shared objective then, and furthermore the right leaders were in the right places to take on the extremists in their midst. Today there is no comparable objective that is sufficiently shared or convincing, and as the sands percolate in the general election hourglass, it is becoming increasingly urgent that (at least) two coherent sets of arguments about what Malaysia should be about are articulated. This will be difficult to achieve when our sense of history is so poor, but it will be impossible to achieve when political parties and their leaders cannot communicate and agree within themselves internally, between federal and state levels, and let alone with their coalition partners.

Do not misunderstand: this is not a plea for authoritarian personality politics - indeed more democracy within the political parties is needed to curtail the arrogant agenda of individuals, particularly where that agenda is primarily to get rich. But just as the original Umno once profoundly decided to change its motto from "Hidup Melayu!" to "Merdeka!", so today's political parties ought to state their beliefs in a straightforward, honest way that will impel their candidates to defend their manifestoes and will leave no doubt for those pessimistic compatriots of ours as to the real meaning of that Merdeka which was so successfully achieved. So while there are many Malaysians who have never been exposed to the Merdeka spirit, those who have (either first-hand or through the stories that have survived outside the education curricula) are doing their level best to recreate it. It is up to the politicians to respond in the right way.

Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Happy Merdeka Day!

Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz is President of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs.

## Flag frenzy

IT'S easy to tell when August has arrived in Malaysia. There's a proliferation of national flags everywhere you look. Flags are draped outside houses, dangling off lamp posts, and entire buildings are encased in a sea of blue, white, red and yellow. Schools blast the *Jalur Gemilang* anthem during assembly and hand out flags for students to wave while they sing along. The month of Merdeka, it seems, sends people into flag frenzy.

But is all this devotion just a show of blind loyalty—an automatic, knee-jerk response to the fact that Merdeka is nigh? It's easy to wave a flag and call ourselves patriots, but how many of us really know the history and significance of the *Jalur Gemilang*?

Siri Neng Buah, a director at the Department of National Heritage, is happy to share the history of the national flag. "The Federated Malay States had a flag with a tiger in the centre," he says. "When Malayan Union came to be, the British wanted to use the Union Jack, since we were their colony. However, locals opposed the move."

He explains the Malaysian flag as we know it today was designed when the Federation of Malaya was formed. A competition was organised to choose a design, and the winner was Public Works Department architect Mohamed Hamzah. While some know of Mohamed, few may be aware of his intriguing multi-cultural heritage. His mother was Indian-Muslim, while his Chinese father Hamzah Abdullah's story was a little more complicated. The son of a gambler *towkay*, Hamzah was raised by a Johorean Malay, Ibrahim Munshi—whose own father was the famed writer Abdullah Munshi.

Since its inception, our flag has been a lot more than just a national symbol. We've all

Bearers of the nation's future hopes and dreams.



witnessed our fair share of wacky uses for the flag—come Merdeka, dozens get all kitted out in *Jalur Gemilang* pantsuits and *baju kurung*. A food blogger made a flag out of *nasi lemak* and condiments, while another blogger saw the flag being used to wrap papayas in an orchard. Siri says one of the most disrespectful incidents he witnessed was the *Jalur Gemilang* being used as a shade in a Negri Sembilan car park. "Personally, I think it's fine for the flag to be used as clothing or attached to a car," he says. "But if you want to wear it as clothing, do so for a good reason. For example, if you're marching in a parade."

He jokes, "Don't wear it as clothing if you're just going cycling, or having a drink at a coffee shop. Whatever you do, you have to respect the flag." Disrespecting a flag is no small matter — Siri has heard of a Thai restaurant in Penang using the Thai flag as a tablecloth. "The Thai consulate was ticked off," he laughs.

Siri adds that he disapproves of torn and dirty flags, which are insults to its symbolism, and proper flag etiquette should be practised at all times, especially when raising the flag.

"Never let the flag touch the ground," he warns. "You have to put it on your right shoulder while you attach it to the flag post."

Siri's advice comes in handy, especially given the fact that a flag flying campaign was launched by the government at the end of July. In Subang Jaya, especially, the local municipal council is taking the campaign very seriously. Residents and business owners are urged to fly the flag outside their premises—all part of a typical campaign, right? Not quite. The real clincher is that participants in the campaign stand a chance to win prizes like iPads and digital cameras.

Encouraging people to fly the national flag might seem a little flippant; a warping of what the flag stands for. But not everyone needs enticements — Ong Poh Chiang, 74, hangs the *Jalur Gemilang* outside his house purely out of love for his country. The Taman Tun Dr Ismail resident says he's been flying the flag annually without fail for almost 30 years. "I usually put the flag up for about a month," he says.

"Sometimes, I leave it there until Malaysia Day." — by Soraya Kee