

# REVOLUTION

2012

POLITICS OF CULTURE

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# Politics & Culture: The Disempowering Division

With a theme this wide, it is difficult to find an entry point (for the convenience of conception and intellection) for introduction, and perhaps should remain so:

The opening article, *More Than A Spring Clean* by f.z., was written with optimism, hinting a new politics in Malaysia that requires much patience and dialogues. Followed by Soumia Mekki's untitled poem, with anger and angst, feeling a tad disappointed, is it hotter today—she asks (or affirms?)—as apathy strikes? The third is Joseph Tang's *A Culture of Incompetence. Political? Definitely.* that addresses the attitude of “tidak apa”, this must be read with an awareness of the construction of colonial psychology and image expressed by Fanon and Alatas. Lastly is Tan Zi Hao's *Absence/Presence*, tackling an age-old Derridean theme and the idea of an absent presence (e.g.: traces, the *pharmakos*) through/in Buozazi's body and #OccupyDataran.

The very political of the culture is alike the *punctum*, a schemata operates precariously in the episteme replacing any deliberation. It is the stereotypical – a leveling act, transposing the most ambiguous to the most valorised.

Within the cultural, stereotypes self-germinate in its operation; a necessary relay to make sense of the mythical or the unknown – this reductionist, if one recall, also Eco's “cultural pertinentisation”, is directly related to the pertinency of our everyday corporeal experience. We assign meanings to practices and utilities (the practicalities), therefore the political has very much to do with the effects (of the assignment) than the contents: they are the semiotic categories, sub-categories, ad infinitum; the nomenclatural – an entrance to language, a calling into anthropocentric existence. For instance, we have only finite language to describe the infinite universe; those languages (not limited to the written and speech) in our (in)finity are our arbitrary estimations of value: how “yellow” and “orange” become dissimilar; how a “lobster” becomes more expensive than a “fish”. Yet between the two colours there exists shades to which our cognition cannot handle; there exists different lobsters and fishes, a lobster or a fish is never another: neither is an event common nor special. But precisely at this conjecture we realise immediately our cognitive limitation which in turn makes the stereotypical seductive, it allows one to handle complexity within a closed network of signifier.

One must be able to work within the language, but no longer to debunk what Barthes perceived as the “myth today”, instead, the “myth tomorrow”: to look for overlaps and interstices; to presuppose a future; to write destinies; to schizophrenise; to look for Eco's *catastrophic point* (“...where so-called features detectors in the human brain isolate the threshold between two emic categories”<sup>1</sup>). Thus, we can hope to cease the violence of meaning, into a new cosmic verbiage.

With the coming of Malaysia's 13th General Election, the politics of culture will again be played, emotive language juggled with political rhetoric that shams social welfare – the stereotypical becomes pertinent again. As the race begins, we must struggle against the politicisation of culture by politicising the everyday life – resistance is an everyday practice! It is only when the people see no division between “politics” and “culture”, can empowerment be achieved. —**TZH**



## Notes:

[1] Umberto Eco, “How Culture Conditions The Colours We See” in *On Signs: A Semiotics Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p.167.



The Bersih movement has sparked many reactions from Malaysians of all ages from all over the world. While the 8 demands of Bersih are a noble cause to fight for, the importance of Bersih has gone beyond its electoral reform demands – the importance of Bersih lies in its significance. It has become the symbol of people power and an important platform to raise awareness of the issues that are and should concern Malaysians.

*by f.z.*

Bersih is a reflection of the change in Malaysia's political culture that we have seen over the past few years. People are becoming braver in demanding their rights. Yes, Malaysians throughout the world came together on 28th April to show their support for clean and fair elections but more importantly, they were there to show their love for Malaysia. As a country with maturing political awareness, many different opinions from various perspectives like mine and yours will be voiced out; and inevitably, clashes in opinions will also arise. There is an urgent need to recognise the importance of

respecting different opinions if we want Malaysia to be the country Malaysians deserve. It is unfair to accuse those supporting Bersih of being ungrateful, rowdy and puppets of the opposition, likewise it is unfair to accuse those not in support of Bersih to be pro-government, close-minded and uneducated. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but with the freedom of expression also comes the responsibility to do so wisely. Bersih symbolises *one* way in our effort to achieve the ideal, but it is NOT the *only* way to achieve that and neither should it be.

“ The huge interest shown by the average joes of Malaysia before, during and after Bersih is a healthy indication that we are heading in the right direction.

The changing dynamics of the Malaysia's political culture marks a growth of the civil society's movement and the increasingly loud voices of the concerned *rakyats* within and outside of the country who are keen on breaking the "takpe lah" attitude that is synonymous with the Malaysian identity. While Malaysians still enjoy hanging out at mamak stalls, with the help of social networking sites, these hangout sessions have been utilised to engage the people with the leaders of our countries. Tweetups, Q&A sessions are organised over Twitter and other social networking sites. The conversations over meals have largely extended beyond football or food as we experience the social media boom. Never has news travelled so fast and wide across the globe. Now that information is rather easily obtained, it forces the government to hold more accountability of the flaws in governance that were previously shielded by the lack of access of information. While it is easy to blame the government, we also have to remind ourselves we are accountable for the country we live in. The line is a cliché, but we really do need to look at the man in the mirror if we want to make that change. The huge interest shown by the average joes

of Malaysia before, during and after Bersih is a healthy indication that we are heading in the right direction. The presence of discussions on accountability of police as well as participants of the rally is a positive sign that we are a maturing society who is able to conduct ourselves rationally.

In spite of my positive outlook, it is a solemn fact that Bersih 3.0 was not without incidents. It is rather sad to see that the peaceful rally in KL was marred by the violent outburst from both sides of the parties, but we need to remember those incidents are not representative of those involved in the rally; touching stories of Malaysians taking care of each other can be found easily over the internet. There is no justification for the violence incited by both sides, and all involved should be held accountable. But that is another story.

The path to the ideal Malaysia is a long one and this is only the beginning. Along the way, mistakes should be expected; some might even take the form of violence in a protest. It is important that we learn from the mistakes and not get stuck in the circle of the blaming game. In our push for demands, patience is required and we need to be realistic. It is a delicate balance. We do not want to rush the process as this could possibly lead to the very problems we are trying to solve. The changing dynamics of Malaysia's current political culture is a rather uncharted territory. It is worth reminding ourselves that we should work together and not against each other. After all, as our "Bapa Kemerdekaan" aptly said, "no matter what we are, we are ALL Malaysians."



Bersih 3.0 on 28th April 2012: what's next?

by SOUMIA MEKKI

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*Build a man a fire,  
and he'll be warm for a day.  
Set a man on fire,  
and he'll be warm for the rest of his life.*

– Terry Pratchett

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Sit there, by your window.

A casual glance at the coffee stains, empty mugs,  
empty pages. Pens all dried, bodies shriveled on your bed.

You simply cannot describe  
how lonely you feel –

No friends to speak to (not talk to, that's far too bothersome)  
no plants to make you forget the sun, glaring, burning.  
It's hot in here.

You had an epiphany while waiting for the bread  
in the toaster, ultimately nostalgic, not even remotely  
consequential.

While dogs and badgers are dying, you're honouring your  
room with a Sisyphusian piece of art:

Newspapers scrunched all over the floor,  
Cheap lipstick marks on your clock  
You forgot how to count  
as if it ever mattered.

Breakfast with Eliot makes scrambled eggs  
slightly more entertaining.

Two hour rants on tradition and wooden floors  
that should do the trick.

Invite Lawrence too, if the ladies weren't over.

If you listen closely,  
you can almost hear the gods envying you.


Today, you are Hercules.

Deprived of damp walls and canned beans  
ordering around fallen angles:

Dig a hole there, another one there  
today is a good day to die.

It's hot in here.





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When you string pearl eyes to stop the light  
it won't take time for you to realise  
that they're staring back at you.  
At this point, perhaps, you will agree  
that the earth's gravity minus the circumference  
of your bottle top are proportionate  
in ways never imagined.  
You can't feel your soul and feet anymore.  
No soul, we've already established that.  
Now fall.  
Medea will weep over you, in return for your  
non-existent profit margins of creativity  
or else you'll find eyes, staring at you, you.  
It's hot in here.  
You're a prophet now, preaching the art of tea pouring  
but they don't care, they turn away, emotionless.  
Heal their wounds with a hair-dryer  
the night Hitler went to heaven.  
Measure your dreams out in a 5ml pipette  
take safety precautions as listed in the testament.  
When you're done, write a Birthday card to  
your dead neighbour.  
Santa never made it, or so they say.  
Tell him you'll be waiting, because frankly  
that's all there is to do.  
Eyes, glaring, eternal, empty pavements,  
interrogate yourself on your dirty sofa and  
it'll all be fine. Why aren't I dying?  
You're losing. Losing a battle.  
Smile now, they'll publish postcards with your face on it  
and paint your portrait sideways  
because if you remember correctly  
you watched your chess pieces burn on your side  
half-amused, momentarily, before catching the eyes,  
staring  
It's hot in here.



# A CULTURE OF INCOMPETENCE. *Political?* DEFINITELY.

by JOSEPH TANG

*Yahoo! Answers* defines “tidak apa” as: The most common being – “never mind” or “doesn’t matter”. But it could also be described as being “uncaring” or “having lack of apathy”.

Firstly, I want to say that I am a Malaysian, and will always be proud to be one. Having established my identity, I will now critique it. Malaysian society, if you did not already know, is made out of three distinct races: the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians. We Malaysians are extremely proud of the abundance of food in our country and the sheer number of holidays that it has! I find this ridiculous because as much as a third of the year is a holiday (including weekends). Consequently, doesn’t an abundance of food smack of gluttony and the vast amount of holidays sound like laziness? Malaysians are also notorious for not being able to be punctual, and we come across as very unapologetic about our tardiness too. Often we send the message that, this is how we conduct affairs here, do not try to change us.

Malaysians generally have laid back personalities and believe that world affairs and general knowledge are secondary. In fact, the standard of English is a clear indicator of what is happening in the Malaysian education system with college graduates that can barely speak a word of English. The rot does not stop there, however, it dwells deep in the bowels to the highest strata of Malaysian society, top down, bottom up. We can see it spilling through in the way we deal with the environment. Rubbish thrown and strewn all over the place, a total disregard for the fellow man. The average toilet in Malaysia fares no better, having an infamous reputation for grime and muck. At the highest level, the corruption and decay of those in politics is systemic to Malaysia.

What I have been trying to describe is the Malaysian

“tidak apa” attitude, a culture of incompetence. My aim is to drag the cat out of the bag, and have a serious discussion on the state of affairs in Malaysia with regards to this prevalent culture.

I will give three examples to illustrate my point.

In 2002, Prime Minister Najib Razak, the Defense Minister at the time, brokered a billion dollar deal to buy 2 *Scorpène* class submarines from France. Prime Minister Najib Razak, was allegedly involved with the murder of a Mongolian interpreter that helped negotiate this deal, and subsequently was thought to have pocketed a 540-million-ringgit commission. All the political intrigue and drama aside, the KD *Tunku Abdul Rahman* and the KD *Tun Razak*, the 2 *Scorpène* class submarines were reportedly unable to submerge due to “defects” detected. It is akin to buying a bomb that cannot explode, a gun that cannot fire. After spending billions of tax-payers’ money (including recent estimates to train submarine personnel and the upkeep of the submarines), all we get is the kitchen sink? No, even a kitchen sink is generous.

I just heard a podcast from BFM radio. It was an interview with Harvard Alumni Wan Nadiah and Nicholas Khaw, who are the interviewers for shortlisted candidates to Harvard College, on why Malaysians have failed to enter Harvard for the second year running. Indeed, this year, no candidates were shortlisted for the final interview as they were deemed “not competitive enough” by the Harvard College of Admissions Office. Among the reasons cited, were the lack of curiosity, the lack of general knowledge, the lack of communication skills, as well as a lack of passion. Interviewer Wan Nadiah explicitly said that the ability to think, to read, to write and to reason are important qualities that they look for in candidates. They agree that education



standards in Malaysia are not competitive, with writing and communication skills clearly on the decline. Interviewer Nicholas Khaw, expressed concern over the importance of reading, and the detrimental effects of streaming weaker students to the Arts after the PMR (Penilaian Menengah Rendah), the Lower Secondary Assessment, in high school. Our results oriented education system sends the wrong signals and emphasis to students, over-emphasising certain industries and sidelining other no less important ones.

For my third example, I wish to bring to light a case concerning plagiarism. Appeal court Judge Abdul Malik Ishak, allegedly plagiarised former Singapore judge GP Selvam's judgment on a copyright issue involving an industrial dispute. Despite repeated attempts made by Karpal Singh to get an answer to these allegations, Judge Abdul Malik Ishak has not responded. A motion to set up a tribunal to investigate this breach of conduct was overturned in parliament. And so we can only assume that a refusal to confront the issue is an admission of guilt and that Malaysian jurisprudence is not exempted from this culture of incompetence.

There have been many other instances of such behaviour in Malaysia.

“ ... the Malaysian government desires the citizens to be unthinking and uncritical as well as uninformed.

This leads to the question, have things always been this bad? The answer, in my opinion, is no.

I believe that this culture has been present for some time, but in recent years, the detrimental effects of it on society can clearly be seen to rear its ugly head. In small ways that we go about our daily lives, be it from keeping our environment clean, to coming on time for appointments, this general apathy can be summed quite accurately as a “tidak apa” attitude.

Now how does this “tidak apa” culture relate to politics? I believe that many of the policies the government introduced in the past decades have helped contributed negatively to the formation of this culture.

The foremost cause would be the changes rendered in the Malaysian

education system and the Malaysian media. In the 1970s, in accordance with the national language policy, the medium of education was changed from English to Malay, the national language. While the Malay language was supposed to unite the races and provide further opportunities for the Malays, I believe it has achieved rather the opposite. In my opinion, it has lowered the national standard of English and this has rendered the country uncompetitive. Furthermore, the salaries of primary and secondary school teachers are considerably low. If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys. If we do not provide adequate incentives, how do we expect to motivate existing teachers as well as to gather better ones? It is no wonder that Harvard has not accepted any Malaysians for 2 consecutive years.

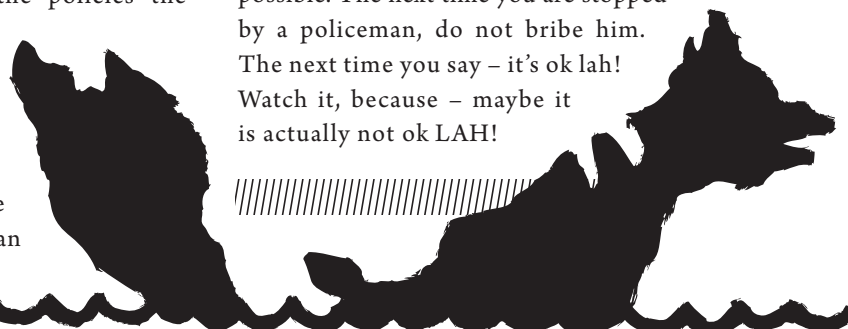
Meanwhile, the Malaysian media contributes to the national mindset. It relies on moral panics and racial politics. The government justifies censorship with the claim of protecting its citizens, however, protecting its own interests and that of the ruling party would be more accurate. While at times, the media seems to be overly simplistic in its delivery methods, it is actually highly sophisticated. Almost every word, especially the headlines, is chosen to indoctrinate the readers. Often conflicting accounts as well as blatant misreporting can be expected. Grammatical errors are a dime a dozen. It is shocking that the media has been allowed to continue, and will be allowed to continue to influence the docile Malaysian public in the given future.

In my opinion, the Malaysian government desires the citizens to be unthinking and uncritical as well as uninformed. This is so that mindless citizens will believe what the media, which is controlled by the government, tells them to do – that is to vote for them.

So what can be done?

It is said that awareness of the problem is the first step to correcting this attitude. On the contrary, most Malaysians are aware of such a problem, but because we allow it to continue, consciously or unconsciously, we pander to it, justify it even, and are part of the problem.

The next time you have trash, throw it in a bin. The next time you have an appointment, come early if possible. The next time you are stopped by a policeman, do not bribe him. The next time you say – it's ok lah! Watch it, because – maybe it is actually not ok LAH!





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故有之以为利，无之以为用  
[Thus what we gain is Something,  
yet it is by virtue of Nothing  
that this can be put to use]  
(trans. D.C. Lau)

— Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching —

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### I. Bouazizi's Body

The burning body of Bouazizi was a declaration most political and personal, public yet private. It was the moment of transfiguration from the modernist body into a primitive body.<sup>1</sup> His self-immolation was a staging of the body whom the state had indubitably abused, so much so that his political will diminished and his being displaced, alienated and removed from the social fabric.

The burning initiates a theatre of disappearance. As it burns, the dying being arrests two disappearances: his protest against the disappearance of the public (the state and the common public); consequentially, the matyrisation of Bouazizi witnessing the disappearance of his *privacy*, now a *publicity*. He has transfigured from a poor victim (privacy, narcissistic), at the moment of spectacle, into the heroic martyr (publicity, altruistic), a palingenesis of the body in public, to which the Dignity Revolution is a paragon of this theatre.

At the confluence of *absence* and *presence*, the body is invested in the dialectics of privacy and publicity. Bouazizi's self-immolation becomes a critique to the *mise-en-scène* of the "public". His transfiguring body is a momentary dyad arresting both social spheres: an overkill of his private body to trade for a resurgent public body previously oppressed. His absence (of privacy) today is transfigured into the presence of solidarity (for publicity). He is not entirely dead.

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## II. #OccupyDataran

An Occupying being<sup>2</sup> is inevitably a presentee but the opposite does not naturally indicate an absence. #OccupyDataran has yet to optimise this power of absence:<sup>3</sup> the *there-then* is always positioned at the center of power that forms an organic hierarchy of the presumably leaderless movement. The non-existence has yet to be recognised; and thus, the dichotomy of absence/presence, a linguistic construct we have committed ourselves in playing, must be problematised:

**Presentee-present** (the “there-then”): these are the bodies present and committed, the leading individuals or the regulars actively involved in the movement. These bodies hold the most responsibilities as they have the knowledge of content and context (of past, present and future). Their source of power lies in their direct participation and negotiation in the political sphere.

**Presentee-absent** (the “there”): these are the bodies present but not committed. They are the spectators, the audience or the passive supporters. These bodies function within the spectacle, they are the convenient numbers, for meddling or *empathetic* solidarity,<sup>4</sup> their source of power lies in their existence of being (having-been-there) in the media/mediated sphere.

**Absentee-present** (the “then”): absent bodies but not entirely absent in the conscience of the movement. These bodies are direct virtual participants offering *integrational* solidarity<sup>5</sup> unknown to the spectacle. Invisible bodies: drawn by the shared values of the movement, the *conscience collective*, their absence (of not being there) is the source of power. These absences provide the movement the necessary peripheral support: being spatially and temporally flexible, these bodies are fluid extensions of the movement. They assume and switch different ad hoc roles, doing activism sub rosa.

**Absentee-absent** (the “non-existent”): absent bodies, absent-minded;<sup>6</sup> these are the floating bodies. This category—perhaps encapsulates the largest group of bodies than all preceding categories—has its source of power within an absolute majority and impartiality.<sup>7</sup>

Very often, the direction of activism is entrenched in the seduction for a warranted presence of the *absentee-present* or the *absentee-absent*.



### Notes:

[1] The prescription of the body in Guattari’s pre-capitalist mode or Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity.

[2] Referring to the body (or bodies) of #OccupyDataran, whatever it means, the use of abstraction here is strategic.

[3] Barthes has commented on Chaplin’s method employed in *Modern Times*: “to see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see” [emphasis his]. This is also the theatre of disappearance, a play of presence in absence.

[4] Shlomi Segall offers a working definition of social solidarity comprising four phenomena: integration, commitment, empathy and trust. Adjectivising these categories is to commit a flawed reading, but the use of adjective here is to single out a characteristic most prevalent in these bodily acts.

[5] See Note 4.

[6] Neither “indifference” nor “apathy”, but an absence of association and commitment.

[7] It must be understood that nothing is impartial but what has been addressed here is the multiplicity of bodies that could generate a critical mass insuring the best impartiality within a community.

EVIDENCE ACT SEC.114(A)

# BUKTI PEN<sup>+</sup>TING?

#STOP114A

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