The cynical sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim has caused a spontaneous outrage amongst the Malaysian communities. The masses took to the streets, initiating and participating in a series of peaceful street demonstrations to show their discontent. While some have thought that street demonstrations will not serve any purpose, some considered the demonstrations and protests as common in a democratic polity.

When the people take to the streets to demonstrate and protest, is it good for the country? Does it serve a purpose?

'Social Owl' edited this [The Right to Demonstration?!], the second paper of our "Social Analysis Series" to analyse the various questions commonly asked regarding street demonstrations:

◊ Will demonstrations inevitably turn violent?

◊ Demonstration = unpatriotic?

◊ The people should not go to the street, but find other 'legal' recourse?

◊ Why demonstrate? Why not wait until the election and express oneself through the ballot box?

◊ Has the mass media been fair in their reporting with regard to the 'Reformasi' demonstrations?

◊ Should university students be deprived of their right to demonstrate?

◊ Will demonstrations be effective?

◊ What is the relation between demonstrations and street politics?

The Right to Demonstrate?!



Social Comment



As a new millennium dawns, it is unfortunate that Malaysia is immersed in a state of political turmoil and social upheaval. Confronted with the contradicting and controversial speeches and statements made up of rumors, lies and half-truths, there is a sense of loss and confusion amongst Malaysians.

Numerous statements on the current situation are written in the local newspapers: some are mildly assuring; some are excessively critical. There is certainly no lack of statements that sing to the official tune to bring the public under a state of subservience. What is found wanting are rational and objective analyse on the situation to dispel the doubts, fears and confusion of our general public.

In view of the above, a group of university students and youths who are engaged in various professions have come together to discuss, write and edit this series of articles. They aspire to rationalize the situation from its seeming mess, to stay clear of seditious statements, yet to project an objective social analytical perspective on the matters and issues raised in these trying times.

We do not assert that what we present in this series are irrefutable truths. Any constructive criticisms will be most welcomed.

It is our earnest hope that through this series, we would be able to contribute in our limited effort, to provoke rational and analytical thinking, towards realising a better and more judicious Malaysia.

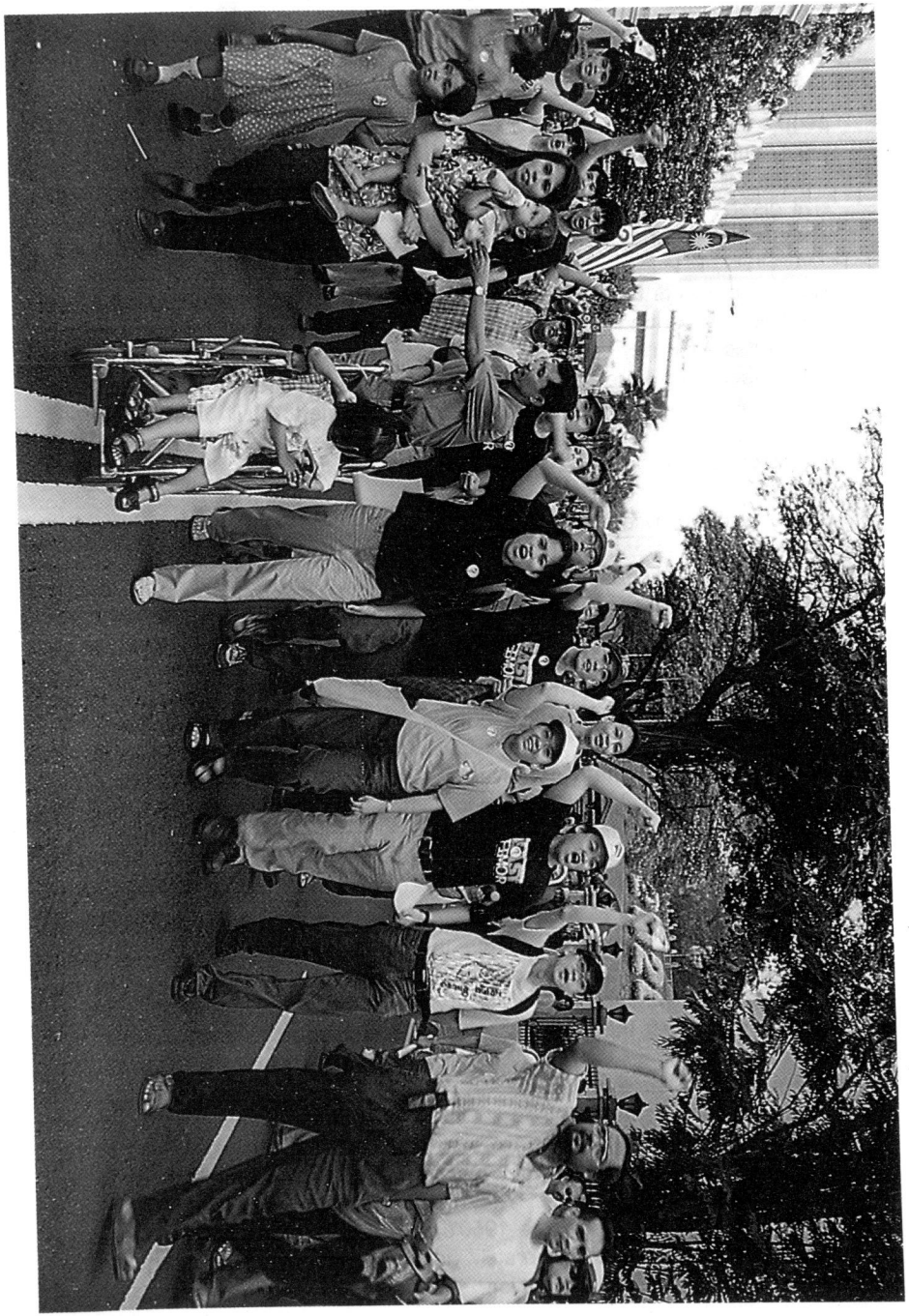
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Following the contemptuous sacking of Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the masses took to the streets, initiating and participating in a series of peaceful street demonstrations to show their discontent ...

September 3 -10
Daily ceramah by Anwar at his private residence in Bukit Damansara, thousands attended these gatherings every night.

September 11
Daily gathering in Anwar's private residence was canceled, but more than 10,000 supporters still gathered around his house.

September 12
Anwar attended and spoke in public rallies in Bukit Mertajam.

September 20
At the same time as Anwar was arrested, about 50,000 people (foreign media reported that there were 100,000 people) of all races and age gathered at the Independence Square (Dataran Merdeka), calling for political reform. The crowd later marched to the National Mosque.

On the night when Anwar was arrested, his supporters marched into UMNO Headquarters Building, and later gathered outside the Prime Minister's official residence chanting slogans supporting Anwar.

September 21
More than 10,000 people staged a peaceful demonstration in the morning outside the Kuala Lumpur High Court, chanting "Reformasi" and "Undur Mahathir".

In the evening, 50 of Anwar's supporters gathered outside the Bukit Jalil Sports Stadium carrying banners and posters, calling for the release of Anwar.

September 25
After their prayers, more than 10,000 people staged a public rally at the National Mosque, distributing pamphlets to the public, in support of Anwar.

September 27
Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat and Gerak were formed.

September 28
Hundreds of people staged peaceful demonstrations at the State Mosque in Kuantan, Pahang and a mosque in Batu Pahat, Johore.

October 5
Hundreds of women gathered outside the National Palace, the official residence of the King.

October 10
More than 20,000 people gathered on the street outside SOGO shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur and stretching for almost 1 km to Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, chanting "Reformasi". A procession of motorcyclists, organised by Anwar's supporters, patrolled the same street.

October 15
10,000 people attended the launching of Penang Gerak at the Kepala Batas Mosque. Speeches were delivered by leaders from PAS, DAP and ABIM.

October 16
Thousands of people attended the Gerak gathering at the Alor Setar Mosque.

October 17
Thousands of people gathered and staged a peaceful demonstration along Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kuala Lumpur.

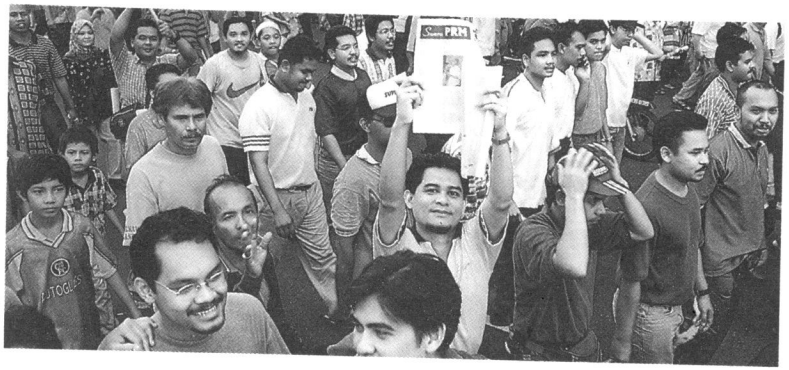
October 18
Moon cake festival. Hundreds of people took part in a "Reformasi" lantern procession from the Dataran Merdeka to the Central Market in Kuala Lumpur.

October 24
Thousands of people staged peaceful street demonstrations at various parts of the nation's capital.

October 31
1,500 people gathered at the Kampung Baru Mosque in Kuala Lumpur to support Anwar.

November 15
At the Asia-Pacific People's Assembly in Kuala Lumpur, 360 members of various non-governmental organizations (NGO) and hundreds of political reformists gathered outside the KLCC, staging a peaceful demonstration.

November 27
More than a hundred University of Malaya students staged a peaceful demonstration alongside the Federal Highway.



Appendix

Civil disobedience is the deliberate and public refusal to obey a law. Some people use civil disobedience as a form of protest to attract attention to what they consider unjust or unconstitutional laws or policies. They hope their actions will move other people to correct the injustices. Other people regard civil disobedience as a matter of individual religious or moral conviction. They refuse to obey laws that they believe violate their personal principles.

Most lawbreakers try to escape punishment. On the other hand, people who practice civil disobedience accept willingly their punishment for breaking the law. In this way, they can dramatically demonstrate their deep concern about the situation they are protesting against. Many lawbreakers use violence. But most acts of civil disobedience are nonviolent. Civil disobedience is usually distinguished from riot, rebellion, and other types of violent opposition to law and authority.

Is civil disobedience ever justified?
Throughout history, there has been widespread disagreement concerning the use of civil disobedience in a society based on law and order. Some people claim that citizens are obligated to disobey laws they consider unjust, such as laws segregating the races. They say that such lawbreaking may be the best way to test the constitutionality of a law. Some defend the use of civil disobedience by pointing to Nazi Germany's laws calling for extermination of Jews and other groups.

Other people claim that it is never right to break a law deliberately. They argue that defiance of any law leads to contempt for other laws. Any act of civil disobedience, they believe, weakens society and may lead to violence and anarchy (no government or law).

Many people approve civil disobedience only in extreme circumstances, and then only if it is nonviolent They argue that iniustices can usually be corrected legally through democratic processes. Free elections give people a chance to choose their leaders and express their views. Various constitutional provisions also protect the right of dissent and protest.

History of civil disobedience.
People have practised civil disobedience for hundreds of years. K. Gandhi in South Africa led a nonviolent protest at discrimination against Asians in the Transvaal. Later, he led the Indian people in strikes and protest marches to free themselves of British rule. They gained independence in 1947.
In the United States, during the 1950's and 1960's, Martin Luther King and other civil rights workers deliberately violated Southern segregation laws as a means of fighting racial injustice.

14. Is there a conflict between street politics and democratic assemblies?

Street politics and democratic assemblies are important limbs to democracy politics, and they supplement and complement each other. In a democratic state, they are legitimate and just process which build upon one another to advance the structure for a more developed, healthy and stable democratic system and consciousness.

In countries practising democratic assemblies, it is normal to have street politics. Furthermore, it is enshrined in Article 10 of our Federal Constitution that all citizens have the rights to "freedom of speech, assembly and association".

Article 10 (1) provides that subject to Clauses (2) (3) and (4) –

a) every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression;
b) all citizens have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms;
c) all citizens have the right to form associations.



Hence, our fears and suspicions towards street politics are unwarranted and unnecessary.

left: Tian Chua sit infront of a water canon tank to defense people's right to assemble

In a letter dated 16 April 1963 and delivered from his cell in the Birmingham Prison, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and black American human rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. wrote:

"I have almost reached the most regrettable conclusion, that the Negro's greatest stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order then to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice"

On demonstrations for political reform, what did they say?

Yunus Rahmat, Deputy Education Minister: "Demonstration is unsuitable in the present situation; students from the universities should not be involved. Our social awareness and standard of education have changed a lot, resorting to violence will not solve problems ..."

Sulaiman, an UMNO veteran: "I am disheartened with the demonstrations and street violence over the last few days. I am worried that it might fuel racial confrontation ..."

Najib Tun Razak, Education Minister: "Once we have gathered sufficient evidence, the Education Ministry will take actions against those lecturers and students who have violated our country's law and the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) ..."

Ong Ka Ting, Deputy Home Minister: "Demonstrations will disrupt our country's political stability, affects our tourism industry and frighten away the foreign investors ..."

Dato' Seri Mahathir Mohamed, Prime Minister: "We have fair elections in this country, we will not allow unrest to overthrow the government ..."

Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi, Foreign Minister: "Without peace and social stability, there can be no economic stability ..."

A Deputy Home Minister: "Do not stretch the patience of the police. There will be undesirable consequences if the policemen are provoked ..."

Chairman of the Malaysian Shopping Centres Association: "The demonstrators have ruined the image of Malaysia ..."

Federation of Consumers Association Malaysia (FOMCA): "Social unrest will hurt the interests of consumers and the country's economic development will suffer. It must be stopped ..."

Khoo Ooi Seng, a MCA State Assemblyman: "The Chinese should not take part in these illegal assemblies, allowing themselves to be manipulated. The nation's interests must come first ..."

Lim Keng Yaik, Primary Industry Minister: "The prime minister is always on the forefront for reformation, Malaysia does not need any political reform movement."

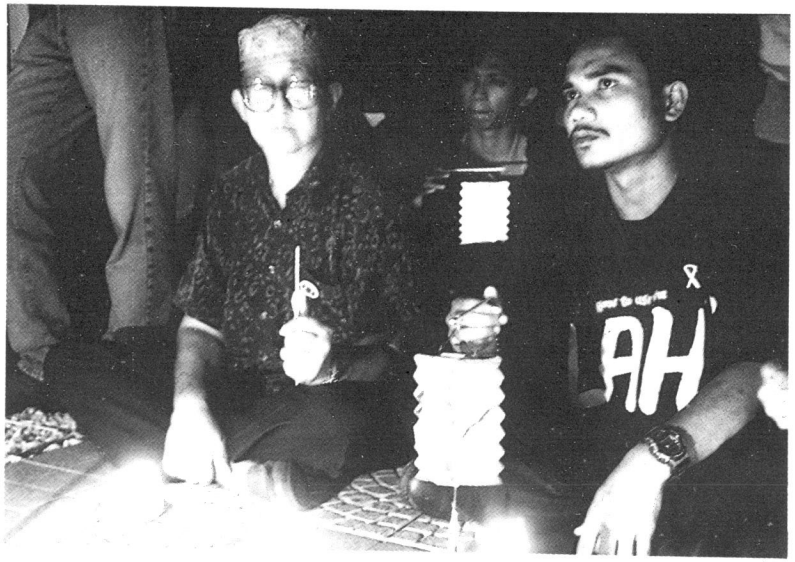
What do the demonstrators say?

Cheng, 24, University Malaya student, Chinese

Why did you take part in the "Reformasi" lantern procession?
Traditionally, the Mooncake Festival has always had its political significance. A lantern procession on this day to resonate the people's aspiration is inspirational and meaningful.

As a university student, aren't you afraid that action may be taken against you?
Those who cited this excuse that "the University will take action against them" to justify their inaction will have to be responsible for their greater fear which will be institutionalized in the future.

Do you think that the lantern procession is effective?
We can't expect one single action to result in a popular effect or change. However, the message of "Reformasi" has been widely disseminated and embedded in the people's minds, very much due to the media reporting and deliberation. It has offered an opportunity for the various ethnic communities in Malaysia to appreciate the good Chinese culture and custom. Undoubtedly, this particular action has its significance, albeit only to a certain extend, but this is only part of the process to reformation.



The lantern procession provides opportunity for the various ethnic communities in Malaysia to appreciate the good Chinese culture

elected representatives, the people are indirectly participating in matters concerning nation building. However, it does not negate our right to express ourselves, in our concern towards nation building, through other means and modes outside the assemblies such as the participation in analytical discussion in the papers, public forums or gatherings, processions, demonstrations and rallies.

By street politics, the people gather in the streets in public gatherings, demonstrations, rallies and street theatre, etc. to express their political aspirations and wishes. It need not necessarily concern a political issue or dissatisfaction towards the ruling government. In many instances, it shows our concerns towards politics in general, or to express our political stance towards a national or international issue.

For example, during the National Day celebration or festive processions, we organize and participate in large-scale gatherings and processions. Such examples are In "Love Malaysia" rallies, rallies in support of the Bosnian and Palestinian causes, gatherings and processions to the American embassy to submit memoranda and petitions, protesting against the American's initiation of the Gulf War, or the recent protest opposing the aerial attacks of Iraq by the British and the Americans. Other prominent examples of street politics in Malaysia include the nationwide 'Semarak' campaign launched by the Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir in 1990, and the massive rallies across the country to support the Mahathir government in 1992 in the midst of constitutional controversies to remove royal immunities and privileges.



Demonstration in support of the Bosnian causes

Demonstrations and protests are also effective means of mass conscientisation and education. When a particular action was reported by the mass media and has stimulated public discussion, the message of that plight or issue will be transmitted to an even wider cross-section of the public, the outcome of which is usually more direct and prevailing than writing long articles in the papers. It is not prevalent in Malaysia that our common public, especially those who have not attained higher degree of education, learn and understand an issue through analytical papers or words. The public knowledge on women's rights, environmental awareness, cloning and abortion are normally gained from news reporting on such issues, and not from articles engaging in analytical debates.

Participation in demonstrations will also enable us to get out of our constricted social circle and enable us to broaden our perspective. We will then begin to relate ourselves and have real sympathy and concern for the issues confronted by other people, irrespective of race, social status and community; for example: the Bukit Merah villagers encountered threats of radio-active industrial waste which would be detrimental to the environment and human health; the livelihood of our indigenous communities will suffer the consequences of massive deforestation; the oppression suffered by our workers because of a lack of protection for their interests and rights, etc. It is through the demonstrations and protests that we nurture our awareness and consciousness to our existing political system, perspective and social behaviour, and through which we can review and make amendments to our policies and laws to ensure that our society will be more just and fair.

Demonstration is a mode of education by practice, enabling the people to realise that our personal rights and interests are inevitably intertwined with that of the public. It is with such consciousness that we will take immediate actions to safeguard public interests so as to protect those of our own.

In the wake of the matters concerning Anwar, Malay youths have begun to realise the defects of a biased press and nepotism in UMNO, and this has prompted them to think and demand for reforms. All other races must learn from these righteous Malay youths, to understand the need for political reforms and to relate these to the securing of our rights and interests.

13. What is the relation between demonstrations and street politics?

Street politics is an integral part of democratic assembly. One of the main characteristics of democratic assembly is that the people will elect their parliamentary representatives who will act as their mouthpiece in voicing the wishes and plight of the people in the parliamentary assemblies. Hence, through their

Some quarters have branded you all as "cultural traitors". What do you think?
Such an argument is rather conservative. In fact, culture cannot be devoid of life. Such reactions is, however, inevitable because a demonstration has yet to become a common means of protest against injustice in our social context. For me, I think we should not be contended with lowly cultural presentation. Instead, we should aim for a higher plane to look at our cultural needs.

Hani, a Malay lady

Why did you participate in the demonstration?
The sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister and the biased press are distressing. I hope to see that justice and democracy will prevail in our country one day.



Why do you choose demonstration as a means to convey your dicontent?
Even though there is a constitutional guarantee for democracy and freedom of expression, I find that there is no other mean for us to express our disagreement with what the ruling party is doing.

Do you agree that demonstrations will lead to unrest?
This depends on the motive of having the demonstration. Our demonstration is non-racial, not about food or lodging, but about justice and human rights. I do not think that it will lead to unrest, unless those in power purposely incited it, like what had happened in Kg. Baru.

Don't you think that it is dangerous to participate in a demonstration?
It may be dangerous, but it may be not. If we are protesting against the present political leadership, it is dangerous. We are practising double standards in this country! However, even if there is danger, I will still take part in it because I cannot tolerate injustice and the oppression of these 'authorized gangsters'.

Mas, 28, an Indian

Why did you participate in the demonstration?
At first, it was out of curiosity. The mass media are controlled and only serve the interests of the ruling parties, so I don't trust their reports. Sick of reading those headlines that were packaged with lies, I have decided to go and see for myself, and to be in touch with the masses which are brave and courageous in expressing their feelings.

Are you aware that by participating in such demonstrations might lead to undesirable consequences? Aren't you afraid?
At first I didn't. I never thought that it will lead to violence. Afraid? Not at first. On the contrary, I felt proud to be in the crowd. I felt that there is a sense of cooperation and unity, irrespective of race, religion or social status ... everybody is there for the justice of the country.

But, when the policemen charged into the crowd and assaulted the people with their weapons, I felt scared. In addition, the chemical water from their canons and tear-gas ... the peaceful demonstrators had no defence, they ran for cover, in fear and in pain ... some of them fell on the floor, some were beaten up by the FRU with canes and batons, some were being punched and kicked by the plain-cloths police. It was quite horrible."



It has always been our common wishes that our university students will be concerned with issues and matters happening around them, that they will contribute positively towards nation building. The demonstrations and controversies that have led to such protests offered an ideal opportunity for the university students to understand the plight of the people and the related policies. Rather than to hold them in the ivory towers, this will enable our university students to have a better understanding of the society and it will help them to grow and develop into better citizens. To keep our university students away from demonstrations will deny them their duty in carrying out their social obligations. University students should be able to deploy their capabilities – their thoughts, their capabilities to analyse, to organize — to care for the society and to share their ideals with the masses. The masses will certainly benefit from their contributions, but at the same time, our university students will be mature in the process and develope into useful citizenry of our society.



Student as catalyst for change and justice

12. Does demonstration serve any socio-educational purpose?

Demonstrations will nurture public awareness and concern towards a particular issue (or something affecting our rights), allow the people to relate and analyse an issue which affects our personal beings, and the exercising of one's rights.

It took almost 10 years of the people's time and effort before the High Court finally ordered the plant to cease operation. This is a landmark decision that has gone a long way in nurturing our people's concern, consciousness and confidence in environmental protection.

The effectiveness of demonstrations is also manifested in the Cheras anti-toll mass action in 1990.

When toll collection was imposed on the Cheras highway, many road users protested against the hefty rates. Road users began a series of anti-toll actions by paying toll in 1-sen coins or RM500 notes. Some road users gathered at the toll plaza to demonstrate their discontent. Such protests were hugely appreciated by other passers-by who honked in support of the mass actions.

After a week, these protests developed into a massive demonstration and the company finally backed down to reduce the toll rates to half.

In the beginning of this year, the government announced increased toll rates for the North-South Highway and four other highways. This has again prompted the people to demonstrate in protest of such injustice. Finally, the Prime Minister announced to reduce toll hike for the North-South Highway and the toll rates for the other highways.

If the residents of Bukit Merah and the highway users hade not expressed their discontent and grievances through these demonstrations, would anyone have expected that their problems and pledges be considered by the government and the authorities as they should be?

11. Should university students be deprived of their right to demonstration?

In a country that practices democracy and claims to have proper governance, every citizen has his or her right to freedom of expression, thoughts and to employ all available means to express his or her opinions (including demonstrations). University students should not be deprived of such rights.

To keep university students from participating in demonstrations, the Education Minister has threatened that they will be expelled from the universities. This is not only unwarranted, it is downright improvident. It shows a lack of confidence in our education system and its potency, to treat university students as immature and hence unqualified for such rights to make decisions on national matters and issues. It is ridiculous to consider our university students as an "ignorant" lot, that they are easily subject to the manipulation of others.

Why do you choose demonstration as a mean to convey your discontent?

After witnessing that brutal violence which was unreasonable and unnecessary, I am very angry. Knowing how those protesters were ill-treated in the cells made me even more furious.

Of course, I used to talk about this with my family members and friends, through the telephone, fax machine, email and posting letters to newspapers and periodicals to express my feelings. But, demonstration is a powerful and purposive forum for the gathering of people who will help each other. In it, I found an idealistic place to recharge my batteries.

I have many friends in the corporate circle who are suspicious of political demonstrations. They are more concerned with their rice bowls than to stand up for justice for our country. I am sick of explaining my position to them. In the demonstrations, I was able to meet many like-minded people, obtain first-hand information on the Anwar matters, and get to know more about the abuse of power by certain people and our unjust legal system.

Nuri, a Malay woman

Why did you participate in the demonstration?
I have found out that this is an avenue which has made it easier for our voice to be heard.

Why did you bring your child to the demonstration?
I didn't bring any of my children to the demonstration. But, they fully understood what I was doing, and I have explained to them what we are fighting for.

Do you agree that demonstration will lead to unrest? Why?
I totally disagree with this. The demonstration for "Reformasi" will never lead to unrest, because we advocate peaceful protest. To say that demonstration will lead to unrest is a question better to be answered by those so-called law enforcement officers and agents of provovateurs. We have proven that our demonstration is a peaceful protest.

Don't you think that it is dangerous for you to participate in a demonstration?
For the future of our country and our future generations, I am willing to take this risk.

Unfortunately, in Malaysia, peaceful demonstrations and protests had been violently interrupted by the police forces. Along Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, the peaceful demonstrators were violently treated with water canons emitting coloured water mixed with chemical irritant, tear gas, batons, canes, and excessive force by the policemen. As a result, unarmed peaceful demonstrators were arrested on the streets. Such brutal interference of the police caused an otherwise peaceful street into a chaotic mess. When the mass media transmitted pictures and video clips of such street violence to the public who did not witness the event at the scene, the demonstrators were blamed for causing such disorder. The legitimate appeal of the demonstrators was thus abruptly suppressed.

In actual fact, such regrettable violence can be prevented and avoided. As a responsible and conscientious citizens, we have the right to demand for the assistance of the police force to maintain order and to arrest such undesirable elements who were present to instigate violence. Members of the law enforcement authorities should not, instead, employ brutal force on the peaceful demonstrators to oppress their rights to express public opinions.



Postman still carry on with their daily jobs when the demonstration took place

There are certain people who advocate the argument of "Demonstration = Violence". However, such a argument works only on the premise that the people are ignorant of the conduct and purpose of a demonstration or protest. This argument is raised mainly to frighten the people in order to avoid the questioning from them (In Malaysia, the 'May 13 incident' and the riots in Indonesia are the most commonly used examples to frighten the masses.)

Undisputed evidence has shown that the rioting in Indonesia was planned. Such violence has made use of the mass demonstrations as a smoke screen to camouflage their ulterior political motives. As they have happened at the same time, the people are confused and hence they draw the conclusion that such violent riots are caused by the demonstrations.

Lawyers are specially trained in the legal profession. It is most significant that these lawyers took part in a peaceful demonstration. Contrary to the claim and belief of many that only the less educated would participate in a demonstration, the lawyers' befitting action has also rightly refuted those who argued that there are 'better and more suitable means' to express our protest or disagreement.

As professionals well versed in the laws, the lawyers' peaceful demonstration has also dispelled the fallacy that demonstrations are illegal and undemocratic.

8. Has the mass media been fair in their reporting with regard to the 'Reformasi' demonstrations?

The mainstream mass media in our country have been unfair in their reporting, and this has caused the demonstrations and most demonstrators to suffer.

The unfair reporting of the mass media can be seen from the following 3 aspects:

i. They condemned the demonstrations, but none has pointed out the cause that had led these demonstrators to take to the streets. It is



Angry citizen burn news paper to express their unsatisfaction on unfair reporting of the mass media

lated, enslaved and commanded for the rest of the 1824 days!

In addition, a demonstration or protest is an effective barometer to gauge the feelings of the people, and this is a means which the government is most willing to take seriously. Many policies and administrative plans affecting the people's very essence of livelihood called for immediate responses to their merits of implementation. They cannot wait until the election.

In January 1999, many people participated in the series of demonstrations to protest the toll hike. There were those who argued that we should leave it to the electoral process, but it is not hard to discover that these are the people who are having their vested interests to serve, or are the bystanders. The toll hike does not affect them, hence they can afford the patience to wait for the election.

Further, in elections, the voters cast their votes having decided on a wide spectrum of agenda or issues: politics, economics, culture and education, etc. The election is not about casting a vote on a specific issue, hence such issues are largely ignored. And the people generally have short memories. Owing to the unfair electoral campaign and unjust electoral system, an election can hardly reflect a just and rationale judgement of the citizenry.

7. Why did the lawyers demonstrate?

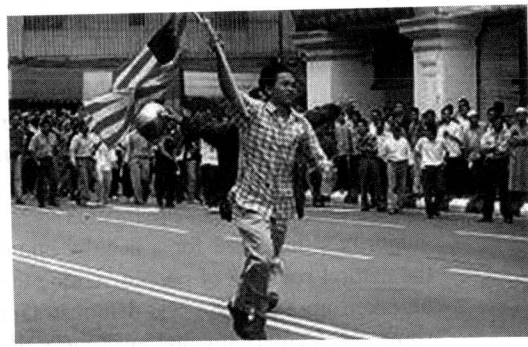
On December 4, 1998, more than 200 members of the Bar Council gathered outside the Kuala Lumpur High Court. They demonstrated peacefully and petitioned to support Anwar's defence counsel Zainur Zakaria, who had been convicted of contempt of court and sentenced to 3 months imprisonment by the High Court. At the peaceful gathering, these lawyers wore a white ribbon on their chest, appealing for a fair trial.



To argue that because 'there is a possibility' that demonstration may lead to riot and hence demonstration must be banned is as ridiculous as to assert that all medications must be banned because an overdose of pills is fatal! On the same premise, may be we should ban all forms of road transportation since road accidents are rampant in Malaysia?

2. Demonstration = unpatriotic?

On the contrary, the appeal of most demonstrations are signs of patriotism. When our citizens go on the streets to protest against incriminating environmental destruction, abuses of power, corruption and social injustice, it manifests their love, concern and dedication for the country. Their services for the country are indeed commendable.



3. Will demonstrations affect foreign investments?

Economic depression set in at the end of 1997 and the government has since put in much effort to lure foreign investors. Almost at the same time, the people started the series of demonstrations to protest the contemptuous sacking and victimisation of Anwar. Hence, many have pointed an accusing finger at the protesters for destroying the confidence of foreign investors, that they are unpatriotic.

However, whether the foreign investors will come to invest in Malaysia or not is determined by numerous factors, including a healthy economic system and a convincingly trustworthy government. If the demonstrations and protests are instrumental for the development and progress of a better system of governance and economic regularity, they are actually a favourable factor to instill and enhance confidence in foreign investors.

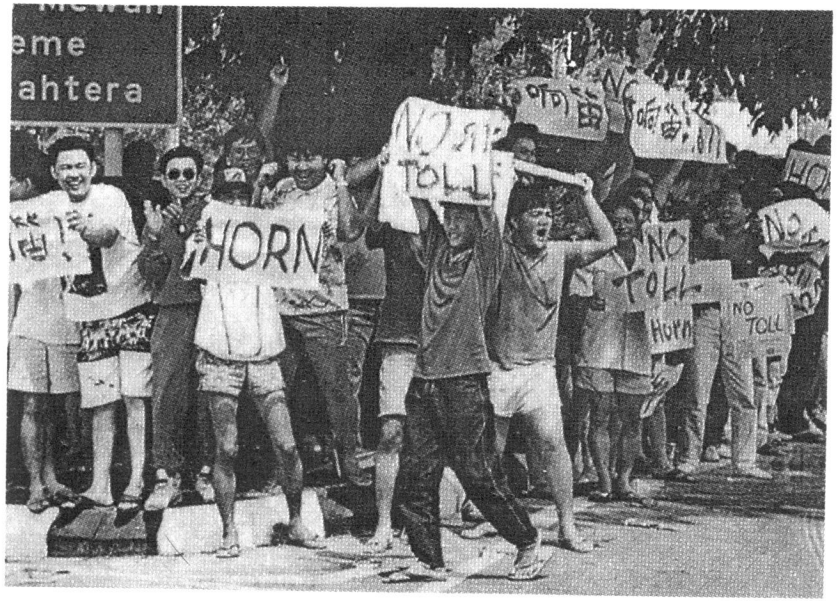
To simply accuse the demonstrators as unpatriotic and blame them for scaring away foreign investors are mere dirty tactics of certain quarters who find that their vested interests and ulterior motives will be better served by confusing the public.

4. Is demonstration necessary?

The question is not whether it is necessary or not. It is a natural reaction to protest about something which people feel is unjust or not agreeable. And it need not be an organised action. It is a collective action of like-minded people who find it a useful form of expression, without causing harm to others.

Like all other forms of expression, such as the issuance of statements, submission of memorandum and peaceful picketing, a demonstration is a legitimate form of expression available to citizens of a democratic state. The difference is only the target addressed and the outcome of a particular form of protest chosen.

In July 1996, a group of joggers in Cheras found in their wake one morning that a huge tract of forest was mysteriously logged during the night. Losing the last 'green lung' in the district, more than 300 people of the 10 residential estates in Cheras gathered in front of the barren hill to protest the authority's disregard for a healthy human habitat. This is an event showing the natural reaction of people venting their anger, hoping that this matter will be taken up seriously. The demonstration and protest had, at the same time, showed the environmental awareness of these Cheras residents.



5. Should the people go to the streets or find a 'legal' recourse?

As long as it is peacefully conducted, the people should be allowed to have their choice of an effective mean to express their opinions, be it on the streets or sitting in the cool conference room. There is no reason for us to interfere with others' choice of means to exercise their rights.

Moreover, in Malaysia, most of the avenues for which the citizens may use to express their opinions are seriously impeded. Under the draconian Publications Act, Printing and Presses Act, Sedition Act, Official Secrets Act, etc. and their severe penalties, the mass media are cowed to sing the tunes of the government on specific issues. They are unable to be the mouth-piece of the masses. In recent years, the internet may have achieved a breakthrough in puncturing the media blackout, but its effectiveness is very much restricted by its limited users and usage.

Submission of mass petitions and memoranda are futile as such efforts are usually snubbed by the authorities. And the elected representatives of the people find it to their better interests to serve their party's cause than to be responsible for the electorate.

Exhausted of the means to funnel their grievances, a peaceful demonstration becomes a most effective mean for the people to express their wishes. The protest against toll collection in Cheras back in 1990 is a vivid attestation of the effectiveness of a demonstration. (please refer to Question 10)

It is only the ruling oppressors who would suggest that the people should seek other means to express their opinions they understand, and are fearful, of the implications of such demonstrations and protests.

There are others who objected to street demonstrations out of sheer fear. Such fears are illogical. And they who equate demonstrations with correspond violence. (please refer to Question 1)

6. Why demonstrate? Why not wait until the election and express oneself through the ballot box?

First, it must be pointed out that the holding of an election does not necessarily mean that there is democracy. Democracy is about our daily livelihood, it is not about the voting once in every 5 years. In a democratic state, the people's right in relation to democracy should arise everyday. It is not about having the power to cast a vote on the one day every 5 years, and be manipu-