

JUST's 5th Young Leaders Programme

Rachel Chan Suet Kay

In tandem with the theme of "Youths: Freedom and Responsibility", the International Movement For A Just World (JUST) organized its 5th Young Leaders Programme from the 17th to the 20th of August 2006. Targeted at youth from the age of 18 to 25, the workcamp sought to incorporate a deeper understanding of global challenges and how youths can contribute towards the creation of a just world; and fostering a closer relationship among Malaysian youths from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Guest speakers included JUST President Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, Professor Shad Saleem Faruqi, and Farish A. Noor.

In his opening speech, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar remarked that "freedom indeed, is a difficult value to define". He further remarked that one could perhaps look at freedom from the angle of justice or equality. But freedom is a concept that one knows, and feels its presence, through experience. There are many types of freedoms. The freedom to speak, to write, to assemble, and to organize. The freedom to be oneself – in terms of language, religion, political belief, and to shape one's future.

This he related to the need for youth to be aware of global issues and how these may impact their choices and the consequences of their decisions. One dilemma in particular was the problem of communal polarization which Dr. Chandra remarked, is increasingly affecting the young.

The freedom that we hold dear to our hearts today is not one that has been easily achieved. We are not born with freedom in our hands, much as we are not born with riches. We inherit freedom from our predecessors who strove to attain this rare commodity. All history is the struggle of humankind. The quest for freedom, hence, is an ongoing struggle. It is the primordial ideal of humankind since the days of Spartacus, and easily before.

The challenge for youth, then, is how do we exercise our freedoms and rights? When Mahatma Gandhi was initially asked for his opinion on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted by the UN in 1948, he replied by saying that "there are no rights without responsibility". The response from other detractors was to come up with a bill called the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities. The UN rejected the latter. The result? They went ahead with rights without responsibility.

One should always take into account the feelings of other stakeholders and whether one's actions is impinging others' dignity. For example, the Danish cartoons. It trespassed the dignity of a people within a religion. This, and many other viewpoints in relation to the main theme were expressed through lectures, presentations, cultural night performances, and games and activities designed to empower participants. Among the dimensions discussed were the fairness of Syariah Law (Shad Faruqi), language and power (Farish Noor), freedom fighters throughout history (Vijaya Samarawickrama), transparency (YK Chin), cultural dimensions (Asma Abdullah), effects of global capitalism (Christopher Boey), and youth activism.(Patricia Martinez). The activities involving participants included telematch games, clay sculpting, performances for the Cultural Night (song, dance, and drama), and of course, much public speaking as they were called upon very often to make a point.

The experience at the workcamp unveiled a plethora of unseen talents and the realization that here we were, a fellowship of multitalented youths who could all utilize our personal talents to work towards positive social change. The Cultural Night was one of glitter and pomp as talents bedecked in resplendent cultural garb rehearsed their lines for the final time before heading upstage. One saw flashes of a Nehru silhouette interspersed with dashes of Hang Jebat's sumping. And all the silk of China could not describe the elegance of cheongsam hems ruffling towards the stage as the audience were seated and the performers readied themselves.

Then the Night kicked off with The Nightingales' rendition of "I Will Survive", an adaptation of the original with lyrics tailored to convey what we had learnt at workcamp. The Nightingales was made up of vocalist-participants Adni, Wong, Raj, Doreen, and Rachel. This was followed by a skit about an Ethics teacher who cheated on his wife and used up all his credit cards, who was finally apprehended by the police.

Another activity which witnessed the cold breaking the ice and the warm sweating it out was the Outdoor Games. On one evening we were made to battle each other's teams using war cries of the Chinese, Malay, Native American, cowboys (I suspect this was made up), and even Sakais! Some belly-dancing maneuvers were employed here, which reduced some to heaps of giggles. There was of course, the ubiquitous water-balloon throwing, in which guys and girls soaked it out in wet T-shirts, and next evening's main course – a telematch version of Fear Factor! In it I was overheard chanting some mantra about human dignity as we shoved our faces into plates of flour to pick up groundnuts with our mouths. Of course, this was only while we (nine to a team) were all squeezed into a single ring of A4 paper cut out to form the largest circle possible. Oh, and did I mention the nine of us had to stand simultaneously on three plastic chairs? Clearly the chairs protested to it by exploding just as we set foot onto it. An indication also, that we had too much for dinner. Sigh... the consequences of freedom...

During the clay workshop, in which we had to mould sculptures of clay to convey our feelings, Harry Potter lost his novelty as we were all transformed into Hurried Potters. In fifteen minutes we fashioned hearts, monuments, angels, and even a piece vaguely resembling the Tugu Negara. My lack of architectural sense notwithstanding, my attempt to perch a relatively obese swan on two svelte pillars of justice turned to rubble. Of course, it is our generation's responsibility to ensure this will not happen (in real life).

In the four days I saw sensitivity towards other cultures overarching all events. Our flatmate who suffered a broken arm was treated with concern, while at the gathering in the coffee house on the third night we all sang songs regardless of origin to the beautiful acoustics of indie musicians' guitar. And underneath the stars the music of solidarity spelled itself in constellations of peace, love, and justice.

Following the camp, previous YLP participant Hakim and I have decided to compile a book of interviews with local academic-activists to discuss the need for positive social change in Malaysia. Writings from YLP participants will be included to portray the youth perspective of Malaysia.

The evident message from the whole experience was that freedom has to be balanced with responsibility. With responsibility, comes freedom. So what is the true relationship of freedom to responsibility? Can one exist without the other? Perhaps it is similar to the chicken and egg analogy? To quote Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, "perhaps freedom is responsibility." For one person's freedom fighter may be another's terrorist.