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Mob rule is not our way

IF some political leaders in the Opposition had their way, this nation may just overtake South Korea and Indonesia, and also Philippines, in the region as the most active in terms of street demonstrations. The alleged vow by one of them to stage such demonstrations daily throughout the country until the Government of the day is toppled would require the participation of thousands of people. Going by street demonstrations staged recently by political parties to champion their cause, the use of children cannot be ruled out. Imagine how many man-hours would be lost. And if children were involved, imagine the psychological trauma they would be put through by adults who would stop at nothing to achieve their goals.

Street demonstrations are a powerful tool to achieve an objective, which can be political or economic in nature. Recent demonstrations in the streets of Manila and Jakarta brought down governments and paved the way for others to take over. In the streets of Seattle, the World Trade Organisation's attempt to push through its globalisation agenda was scuttled by organised street demonstrators. A more violent option is the street wars that the Palestinians have been waging against the Israeli people and forces in Palestine. Student demonstrations in China which lead to the Tiananmen confrontation remains a powerful reminder of how things could go out of control when opposing parties take their quarrel to the streets. Street demonstrations by workers and students in South Korea have become almost a daily affair. In both developed as well as developing countries, people resort to mob power for different reasons and with different results.

For Malaysians, the street demonstrations usually referred to as Reformasi (a name borrowed from Indonesia's Reformasi movement to topple Suharto) was, sadly, started by sacked and later jailed former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. There had been other incidents before and after that, and not all of those staged after Anwar was sent to jail were the work of his loyal followers still active in politics. The Umno Youth made a miscalculated decision to march the streets over the demands made by Siqui which were seen then as a challenge to the basic rights of Bumiputeras. In the 1970s, Malaysian university students abandoned classrooms to hold street rallies in the name of various causes. Some of the student leaders involved in those demonstrations came back - one after having spent decades in exile in the UK - to help organise recent demonstrations in support of Anwar, and against Dr Mahathir and the Government of the day.

The arrest of Keadilan Youth chief Ezam Mohd Noor over his alleged statement that his party would mount street demonstrations daily to topple the Government, therefore, is not "mind-boggling". Any responsible, democratically-elected Government will have to investigate the matter and assure the majority of the people of this country that it has firm control over their peace and security. The fact that Ezam is an Opposition leader is an unfortunate coincidence, not for Ezam but for the Government because its detractors will see the arrest as high-handed and political in nature.

We are surrounded by countries and economies that have been brought down by the help of street demonstrators and so-called people power. But perceptions are changing. In Jakarta, even the foreign analysts have begun to question the street demonstrations. The student activists seemed to be changing from a force that called the shots and pulled politicians into

line into one manipulated and supported by the same politicians whom they would had previously objected to, according to one news report. There are also accusations of rent-a-crow demonstrators. And here we are advocating daily street demonstrations in the name of justice and democracy.

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