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Don't rally without thought

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I HAVE fought three general elections, won two easily and lost in 1990 when every Umno candidate in Kelantan suffered. Except in the 1974 general election, they were held under restricted conditions. I won my biggest majority, with 72 per cent of the votes cast, in a no-holds-barred election (save for the Sedition Act) with 16 days of campaigning in August 1974. In the 1999 general election, only nine days of campaigning was allowed.

Since then, I have realised that open public rallies are as good as allowing uncontrolled firecrackers during the Chinese New Year or meriam buluh (bamboo cannon) on the eve of Hari Raya Puasa.

History is meant to teach us not to make the same mistake twice. Sometimes, it teaches too well, planting itself in the collective consciousness like a tombstone to warn us against taking chances. So it is with the Election Commission's announcement last month to bring back political rallies at the next general election.

First, the history. To his dying day, Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra believed that the May 13, 1969, riots were caused by communist provocateurs. Although driven to tears by what he thought could never happen among his beloved, peace-loving, multi-racial people, the father of Merdeka could never quite admit his error. Nevertheless, he accepted the ultimate responsibility demanded of his office and retired about a year later.

Tengku committed his error upon an unquenchable faith in his new nation, which had conducted free elections since 1955 against the odds imposed by colonial, racial, social and economic inequalities and an insidious communist insurgency. Slurs and slanders of all kinds had been strewn into the potboiler of electoral campaigning with little apparent effect. Each time, the big issues of the day - Merdeka (1955), consolidation of Independence (1959), the Indonesian confrontation (1964) - had returned the Alliance to power with a two-thirds' majority.

The 1969 general election itself had been held without incident. But trouble brewed in Selangor, deadlocked after the Opposition and Government won 12 seats each, with the unleashing of a method of political showdown that has since become the subject of tireless controversy - the public rally or rapat umum. There was another important element: the residual hatred, discord and ill-feeling fomented by the People's Action Party in the 1964 general election, in spite of Lee Kuan Yew's promise not enter the fray. That unfortunate participation was one of the greatest contributory factors to Singapore's subsequent amputation from the Federation.

The Opposition DAP took to the streets to agitate for their claim to govern Selangor. Not unnaturally, Umno reacted. In the escalating tension, in the reckless brinkmanship of the ultras of both sides, only a tiny spark would have been enough to light up the tinder. To this day, the Malays blame the non-Malays, mainly the Chinese, and vice versa for starting the violence. The truth was that some drunkards, the communists, their accomplice saboteurs and assorted hooligans incited the trouble.

The rioting started before news could get across that the DAP's boast of taking over and returning the "Malays to their kampung" could not take place. The smart Gerakan leadership in Selangor and Penang under Dr Tan Chee Koon and Dr Lim Chong Eu (later Tan Sri and Tun respectively) had phoned Tun Razak to assure him that they would not form a coalition with

the DAP. Besides, the lone independent member in Selangor also pledged not to support the DAP.

I have no wish to reopen old wounds nor in any way impede the sustained process of national reconciliation that began after the riots. The time for blame is long past, left behind in the twilight of memory. But the lessons remain and must do so if our political culture is to evolve into stable maturity. With hind-sight, I think the tragedy could have been averted if certain actions had been taken at the decisive moment, if public security, instead of the abstract notions of the Constitution, had been foremost in the minds of our leaders, both Government and Opposition.

If the DAP had been less exuberant and premature in their celebrations, the course of the nation's history would have been different. There are other what-ifs that the political actors of the time have been left to ponder and lastingly regret.

As a result of passions overcoming reason, democracy was suspended, a state of emergency declared. A curfew was imposed, schools and businesses closed and soldiers appeared in our neighbourhoods. The Government was run under a military-style National Operations Council. Thankfully, there were enough strong personalities to pull the nation back from the brink of chaos. But none of them came out of it with their belief in unfettered democracy intact.

Of course, all that was more than three decades ago. The past, after all, is another country. On the face of it, the new model Malaysia should welcome the EC's recommendation to permit political rallies after a lapse of 34 years, following amendments to electoral laws passed last year. Its chairman, Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman, feels that the horror of May 13 has cut so deeply into the nation's politics that it can never be repeated. Besides, the old inflammatory issues - race, religion, the status of the Malay Rulers, Malay privileges - have been buried under the concrete of the Sedition Act and other prohibitive laws.

Abdul Rashid may well be right. He is certainly not ignorant of the historical backdrop as he endeavours to make our elections freer and fairer, an effort which will surely redound on the Government against the baying of its critics. Political rallies derive from the freedom of assembly and association guaranteed in the Constitution. As such, the liberty to hold them is respected by all right-thinking Malaysians, from the Prime Minister on down.

Like the Tengku, however, it may also be dangerous for Abdul Rashid and liberal Malaysians to assume too much. May 1969 marked the point when theory and principle diverged calamitously from practice. Against the crowd-rousing tactics of expert demagogues, such as Pas' religious zealots, it may prove wiser to fear the worst.

In the event violence were to break out, the Government will have to carry the can, as the Tengku did. Understandably, Umno Youth, Wanita and Puteri Umno have objected to the EC's move. Equally, I also understand why the Opposition, Pas in particular, craves public rallies.

Actually, the roiling debate over political rallies is moot. Between the security that is a necessary prerequisite of democracy and the outward symbols of popular participation, security wins hands down. Electoral rallies have never been wiped off the statute books, only held in abeyance until calm can reasonably be affirmed. The arbiter of security is the police, not the political parties. We must take their word for it, not the vouchless promises of the politicians.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that while the Government agreed on the people's right to stage and attend rallies, it had to be borne in mind that the country was also susceptible to threats to public safety. Suhakam and the Opposition parties may support the EC but neither of their

causes will be advanced by the peril of violence. Indeed, the cause of democracy itself could be reversed, as it was in 1969. Whatever they say, I doubt whether rallies will make a big difference to the Opposition's fortunes.

As a means of party political mobilisation in the electronic age, mass rallies are decidedly old hat. They are rarely employed, except in countries where communications, information and party organisation are rudimentary. Developed democracies can hardly resort to political theatre to excite savvy voters. Increasingly, public demonstrations have become a vehicle for extra-parliamentary dissent with little relevance to party affiliation.

During the reformasi demonstrations in 1998, many people were less outraged by the supporters of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's attempt to unseat the Government by mass protest than the traffic jams caused by the closure of roads. Call them lumpen, but they could form the silent majority for which emblematic forms of political expression aren't worth the price of being late for dinner or a hot date!

For their sake, I would be more than content with Inspector-General Tan Sri Norian Mai's assertion that "We have in the past four general elections ensured that rallies and ceramah were held in an orderly manner. We will use our past experience to ensure a smooth election."

Even under the present system, Pas overwhelmingly won Kelantan and Terengganu. So what's the problem? Only if you are prepared for a probable repeat of the May 13 incident and emergency rule (God forbid) would I agree that we should have unbounded freedom, no-holds-barred election campaigns, public rallies and excessive victory celebrations.