

How to solve the problem of Ibrahim Ali?
Malaysiakini.com
June 21, 2011

It must be one of the more poorly kept secrets, but Ibrahim Ali would be counted as among Pakatan Rakyat's arsenal of weapons for fighting the coming general election.

There has not been a week that passes without the Pasir Mas MP saying or demonstrating something that would tend to increase the appeal of Pakatan among non-Malay voters, not to mention moderates among the Malays appalled by mounting confirmation of the man's fire-breathing bigotry.

You can attribute Anwar Ibrahim's refusal to be in favour of action under the ISA or Sedition Act against Ibrahim to a principled stance against use of repressive legislation; there is astute political instinct as well to the opposition leader's position.

Anwar knows that the more the Perkasa chief allows himself to be keyed-up, the more he would lose it for the causes he fronts.

Nothing would please the instinctive politician in Anwar more than making an unobserved gain from the vitriol that spews from a wound-up Ibrahim. Additionally, the spectacle provides an opportunity to test the trends of public opinion, from reactions generated by Ibrahim's drivel.

This is why the Bersih 2.0 rally for electoral reform, planned for July 9, is turning out to be a bellwether of sorts, due in part to Ibrahim Ali and his cohorts' inflammatory responses to it.

Ibrahim's warning to intending Chinese marchers that they should keep indoors on that day and placards carried by Perkasa supporters depicting Bersih chairperson Ambiga Seenivasan as 'Wanita Hindu' would only galvanise support for the July 9 event.

Shrewder for Bersih to meet EC

The offer yesterday by the Election Commission chief to discuss matters with the Bersih organisers provided the latter call off their march is an indication of the increased voltage this event now carries following the amps that the Perkasa crowd has added to it.

Rather than reject the offer which was what Bersih did on the grounds that it was too late to talk, it would have been shrewder to say Bersih are in favour of discussions without pre-conditions.

Ambiga should have rephrased John Kennedy's "Let us never fear to negotiate but let us never negotiate out of fear" with "Let us never hesitate to discuss but let us not attach pre-conditions to discussions."

Altogether though, Bersih has trod a savvy path in the lead-up to the July 9 march by welcoming the copycat reactions of Perkasa and Umno Youth in wanting to organise their own marches.

'The more the merrier' stance of Bersih would strike as naive given the potential for trouble between different sets of marchers, each at cross purposes.

But there is little cause to fear that this would be a replication of the situation that obtained in late October 1987 when Kuala Lumpur was gripped by fear of a Chinese gathering at the Hou Thean temple in Jalan Klang and a massive gathering, planned by Umno, at the Merdeka Stadium.

Then, the issue was a high-tension one: the placement of non-Mandarin speaking administrators by the government in Chinese medium schools.

This was regarded as an affront by the MCA which led by their deputy president, Lee Kim Sai, decided on gatherings at the Hou Thean temple, with Umno Youth responding with a show of force at the Jalan Raja

Muda Stadium where flaming speeches were made.

The stage was set for Prime Minister and Home Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad to intervene to snuff out a confrontation by using the ISA to detain over a hundred opposition politicians and anti-government social activists.

Some Umno firebrands were also detained, including Ibrahim Ali but the latter had mainly belonged to the Team B faction that earlier that year had fought a close but losing battle with Team A, led by Mahathir, in the triennial Umno party elections.

It was a classic Machiavellian manoeuvre by Mahathir to deliberately allow a ratcheting up of tensions to justify the use of repressive measures against opponents while seeming to act to secure the higher purpose of maintenance of public order and security.

Multi-racial grouping

Suffice the issue in contention now is not racial: Bersih's electoral reform objective is not a parochial issue but a critical national concern.

The intending marchers in the Bersih ranks are not concerned with racial projection so much as transcending race to project a national concern.

It appears that the marchers arrayed on the Perkasa and Umno Youth sides would be composed of one race but that is a self-imposed limitation.

The fact that two single-race groups intend to march on the same day that a multi-racial group wants to demonstrate its concerns over a national issue would inherently place the Perkasa and Umno Youth marchers at a disadvantage, from the angle of public perception.

But this has been the quandary in which rabble rousing politicians like Ibrahim Ali have boxed the public into: their reactionary ways have induced them into a racial-cum-religious cul de sac whereas the more constructive exertions of Pakatan are drawing the country away from just this dead end.

Hence the notion that Ibrahim is more boon than blight to Pakatan's project of national reconstruction.

TERENCE NETTO has been a journalist for close on four decades. He likes the occupation because it puts him in contact with the eminent without being under the necessity to admire them. It is the ideal occupation for a temperament that finds power fascinating and its exercise abhorrent.