

**Gov't vs Bersih: An eyeball-to-eyeball situation**  
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COMMENT The parallels and differences between then and now have to be dwelt on for insight and illumination.

Then would be October 1987, when tensions were rising in the country over an issue to do with the placement of non-Mandarin speaking administrators in government-aided Chinese schools.

Party elections in Umno earlier that year had resulted in a controversy-marred close victory for the incumbents. Internecine conflict in the dominant political party is always tinder for the lighting.

The lighted match would come with the controversy over the government's decision to appoint non-Mandarin speaking administrators in Chinese schools.

Switch forward 24 years and the country finds itself in a situation of rising tensions in the immediate prelude to the Bersih 2.0 march planned for July 9, though this time the drivers for the heightened tensions have nothing to do with race or language.

True, there is competitive rivalry in the dominant political party, Umno, but it does no longer stride the political arena like a colossus as it used to.

Now the party displays symptoms of a different ailment to the one that afflicted it in 1987: its weakened position in the parliamentary calculus has emboldened right-wing elements within it to push for a crackdown on an opposition that could defeat it in the fast approaching general election.

Because perception is almost everything in Malaysian politics, the planned march for July 9, if it draws a bigger attendance than did its predecessor in the Bersih march of November 2007, it could well be curtains for Umno-BN in the 13th general election.

As in the comparative 1987 period, the question, in the lead-up to the Bersih 2.0 march in 11 days' time, of how to assure the stability in power of the ruling elite is central to all other factors riding in the balance.

Issues of race, religion, independence of the law enforcement authorities and the like, are like patterns in a kaleidoscope whose formations are dependent on who does the shaking.

**Najib miming the pantomime**

As the baton of Umno leadership was passed to him in April 2009, the prognostications for Prime Minister Najib Razak were that the man, whose father was the catalyst for the tectonic shifts to the Malaysian political landscape in the immediate post-May 13, 1969 period, would either be the initiator of a radical revamp to save the construct or perish in the attempt.

In the two years since he has taken over, Najib has made the shifts and feints indicative of a desire to revamp the system, but a creaking edifice, entrenched in its ways, has budged but little.

This has left the leader miming the pantomime but unable to effect substance of change. On an array of issues, ranging from education to electoral reform, the entrenched system asserts its unchanged ways in spite of good intentions to effect change.

Perhaps the system has to be changed from top to bottom and the main superintendent of change is too embedded in the old to be a harbinger of the new.

Sensing this, the opposition knows that a crumbling system and its defenders-cum-reformers are a final push away from oblivion.

This realisation has propelled them to arrive at a consensus that has shoveled away major differences in their agendas.

They now enjoy unanimity of outlook and aim which is symbolised by their determined support for the Bersih 2.0 march.

### **An ode to democracy**

All successful mass movements need a rallying point around which their disparate aims can coalesce. The Malaysian opposition has found this in the call for electoral reform.

It has helped that the ham-fisted manner in which the authorities are seeking to prevent the Bersih 2.0 march has had the effect of widening the array of support for the event.

When the penning of a poem, ostensibly an ode to democracy, by a national literary laureate is occasion for the police to haul up the author for sedition - the indictment of the authorities by their asininity towards the march is self-evident.

Thus the immovable object, which is the Bersih march itself, and a seemingly irresistible force, which is the security establishment, is poised in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation.

The side that blinks would be the one that resorts to uncivil methods - repression by the one side and disorderly conduct by the other.

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