

**The slow revolution**  
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COMMENT The government is in a quandary. On the one hand, urban Malaysia with its middle-class champions are clamouring for more freedoms and a larger share in the decision-making process but on the other hand, conservative elements amongst the ruling elite are not about to share power with upstart civil society actors. They already have to deal with a united and resilient opposition.

For the ordinary Malaysians, confusion is the order of the day. Just over the weekend, the mainstream press clarion called the success of the government transformation programme. The PM, Najib Abdul Razak, was so elated that Idris Jala was going to be sent to Africa to help other developing nations understand Malaysia's special formula for development. One major element of this new formula is active citizen engagement.

Yet, the Home Ministry's reactions to the proposed July 9 Bersih rally does not match what Najib promised: a more participatory government.

Marina Mahathir said it accurately enough when she explained that the government should come clean and let citizens know that peaceful assembly demanding fair and clean elections is not encouraged. She can then teach her child appropriately to prepare for a life without justice or fair play.

Like many thousands of Malaysians, Marina was not taken in by the rallying cry of Perkasa, threatening to stage an alternative rally. We have seen what regimes can do in Yemen, Egypt and Syria. They put up counter-rallies and step in to "restore" the peace.

If the BN still has doubts about public perception linking it with Perkasa, they should worry no longer. There is no doubt that in the minds of the majority of Malaysians, rightly or wrongly, Perkasa is a BN proxy claiming to represent Malay interests.

At some point, when confronted with a bully, we simply have no choice but to call their bluff. Yes, we have to be prepared for bloodied noses but standing up to a bully is the best way to redress the situation. Through its antics, Perkasa has finally succeeded in uniting all of middle-class Malaysia against it.

If Gerakan, MIC and MCA hope to win in mixed and urban seats in the 13th general election, they will be sorely disappointed. With inflation predicted to rise to five percent and an almost certain second recession in the United States, winning the urban seats will be a Herculean task.

Perkasa's antics, especially Ibrahim Ali's advice for the Chinese to stay home, and more importantly, the BN government's lack of action to rein him in, makes it mission impossible to win back the towns and cities from the opposition.

**Consequences will be dire**

There are rumblings that the government might use this rally and the "clash" between competing interests to reprise Operasi Lalang and lock up the opposition. It can well do that but the consequences will be dire. Middle Eastern regimes who are ten times harder on their opposition have fallen by the wayside. Even in prosperous Singapore, the yearning for greater participation in decision-making saw the ruling party lose 40 percent of the popular vote.

If the government jails the opposition or civil society leaders, social networking through the Internet will spread the story far and wide. More importantly, a new generation of anti-government "leaders" will materialise overnight to take their place. The downward spiral will be uncontrollable.

The reality is that the best solution is to allow the rally to proceed and make sure it is conducted peacefully. Malaysia is not Syria. We are not a military-controlled state. We are also not an absolute

monarchy that does not have democratic legitimacy.

In fact, Malaysia is a fairly well-managed developing nation with developed-status aspirations. If it wants to evolve materially for first world status, a high income and be more knowledge-centric; it must also develop a political culture that will be able to transform this country towards developed status.

This writer is confident that if the rally is allowed to go on and if the police are allowed to do their job, Malaysia will quickly emerge as a most progressive nation. The counter-argument is that once you allow one rally, you will have to deal with many others and soon the government will lose control.

The answer is not to cage your citizens but allow them to express themselves in an orderly fashion. Catch the trouble-makers and not those Malaysians who are exercising their constitutional rights to assemble and express their dissatisfaction.

People understand that the government cannot solve all our problems but by including them in planning and implementing policies that will improve their lives, the government will be teaching them to fish instead of just giving them fish all the time.

Even if Bersih can assemble a million Malaysians, the government still does not have to agree with them. After all there are 28 million Malaysians and the majority gave Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the BN the mandate to govern in 2004 and 2008.

What the prime minister can do now or as soon as possible is to go to the polls to secure his own mandate. Then, he will have more space to manoeuvre. Even if he does not secure a two-thirds majority, the BN can continue to govern with dignity. More importantly, new policies like 1Malaysia, the New Economic Model and other initiatives can also be ratified by the electorate.

There is little doubt that a hard-line approach to the Bersih Rally will be counter-productive. It is also a futile effort trying to play a refereeing role. Like in the Middle East, no one trusts the government of the day to rise above petty politics.

The biggest challenge now is to disassociate the BN from Perkasa and other non-governmental organisations that have assembled to challenge Bersih. If these organisations truly feel that elections in this country are both free and fair, they should also be allowed to assemble and demonstrate their beliefs. The only problem with this route is that there is a very real possibility that they cannot assemble as big a crowd.

Malaysians may be truly-fed up with politics but very few of us like being held to ransom by the lunatic fringe. We are also matured and secure enough to be allowed some of the freedoms promised to us in the constitution. The government should not wait for this slow revolutionary moment to pass. By being a bystander, it may just find itself consigned to the dustbin of history.

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