

Agong slows gallop to the precipice
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COMMENT Now that the king has intervened to moderate tensions leading up to the July 9 marches, it would greatly alleviate matters if the police release all those they have detained in the past week and dropped charges against them.

This move, if accompanied by the commencement of talks without pre-conditions between the Election Commission and Bersih on the latter's eight demands, would avert a showdown in the nation's capital on July 9.

A simultaneous tripartite response - by the police through freeing detainees and dropping charges; the EC by electing to talk without conditions with Bersih; the latter by calling off their march while talking to the EC - would open the trail to a modus vivendi.

No need for any triumphalism on the part of the interlocutors; suffice, all three parties to the imbroglio cease and desist in the paths they have thus far trodden, and then, simultaneously, take one step back.

Bersih is meeting this morning to see what to make of the king's demarche. Its chair, Ambiga Seenivasan, has hinted that in view of the king's statement, the situation may change.

This is the overture that should not be scanted by the police and the EC. They each should issue suitably mollifying statements as prelude to the steps that would conduce to pacification.

All of the past two weeks, that situation was galloping to the edge of the precipice, mainly through the reactionary attitude of Perkasa.

A plan to engage in symbolic speech, if accompanied at all times by civility, ought not to have caused the fret and fever, intimidation and repression Bersih's plan for July 9 was seen to induced in Perkasa and, latterly, the police.

An understanding of the guarantees on freedom of speech and the right to assemble in the Merdeka Constitution would have favoured the right of Bersih to hold their march as planned.

But an arbitrary overlay of amendments and contortions, by the BN government over the years when it enjoyed its two-thirds parliamentary majority (it had that majority for 51 of the past 54 years), has warped the Merdeka Constitution's bedrock guarantees.

This has been the bacillus that has infected the body politic. The Bersih march for July 9 was part of the curative process.

But the pugnacious responses of Perkasa and the intimidating and preemptive ones of the police have ratcheted up tensions such that no party to the looming confrontation could back down without losing face.

This approach violated one of the hallowed planks of military strategy recommended by the historian Basil Liddell Hart who counseled combatants to always give their adversaries some room to manoeuvre out of a confrontation. This saves face and averts catastrophic confrontation.

Agong's plea for moderation

Perhaps sensing that the looming confrontation on July 9 was leaving the parties no room for a bypass, the king has interposed with a plea for moderation.

His statement was like a sponge down the back of the would-be confronters. At this stage, a lessening of

confrontational rhetoric by all parties is imperative.

Bersih's emollient hint and announcement of a meeting this morning to discuss the latest developments should be met by reciprocal conciliatory steps from the police and the EC.

Leaving the onus of conciliation on Bersih alone would be unwise and undiplomatic.

In this respect, it behooves the police to come up with something that will smooth ruffled weathers.

The police, by detaining six Parti Sosialis Malaysia officials on an ordinance enacted in 1969, have displayed an obscurantism that is truly astounding, given all that has been recommended, by royal behest no less, for the force's modernisation and updating.

The recommendations of the royal commission set up in December 2003 for the improved management of the force are sometimes more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

The EC should also match conciliatory word with concessionary deed. One or the other of Bersih's eight demands ought not to be too hard to acquiesce in prior to the commencement of talks should the NGO call off their march in advance of negotiations.

In sum, a step backwards on all frontal positions of all parties to the July 9 march would avert confrontation and promote civil society.

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