

Bring about a healthy democracy
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The King has issued a statement on the developments surrounding the proposed Bersih 2.0 rally for free and fair elections. What do we make of it?

It is quite clear that he is not in favour of the rally proceeding on July 9, although he does say that the original intentions of street demonstrations can be good. This, read together with his acknowledgement of "the political fervour of a section of the people to bring about a healthy democracy (menyuburkan demokrasi) in our country", indicates he is not condemning Bersih 2.0.

He is aware that the people are involved (even though it constitutes "a section"), and what they desire is something positive, i.e. menyuburkan demokrasi.

He is, however, concerned that "street demonstrations bring more bad than good" and he wants it ensured that the people's democratic demand "does not bring destruction to the country".

He advocates that whenever a problem arises, "we as a civilised society should (hendaklah) resolve it through consultations".

What has been the effect of the King's statement on the parties involved?

Prime Minister Najib Razak's first reaction is to offer Bersih 2.0 the opportunity to protest in a stadium. This is the most accommodating posture he has struck since the controversy began. In doing so, Najib has now come to 'legitimise' Bersih without openly saying so, although only a few days ago, his Home Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, had declared Bersih 2.0 an illegal organisation effective July 1.

Najib's offer indicates he has lost the battle of wills against the movement for electoral reform and is now scrambling to save face by making this offer. But it's not good enough. He has done too much damage; he has used an atom bomb to annihilate ants through his unreasonable, even maniacal arrests of people in the past week.

The worst is alleging that the 30 Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) members arrested in Kepala Batas were waging war against the King, and subjecting six of them to detention under the Emergency Ordinance.

The King has not, figuratively speaking, slapped Najib's face, but he has tapped him on the shoulder by saying in his statement, "I also urge the Government to carry out everything that is entrusted to it by the people in a just and wise (bijaksana) manner".

The words "just and wise" can be read as a reminder to the government that it has been using unfair and sometimes inane tactics over the past week. The most inane would be either alleging that the PSM 30 were resurrecting communism or declaring Bersih 2.0 illegal.

Najib is like the head prefect who has been caught out by the headmaster and is now being told to carry out his duties within the school rules.

It is noteworthy that the King uses the line, "entrusted to it by the people". It issues a very important reminder to a government that has become arrogant and unmindful of the rule of law, which is evident in its arbitrary arrests of people over the past week, in one case for simply wearing a yellow T-shirt.

It is further significant that the King says he does "not want to see animosity develop between the communities in our plural society or a section of the people being enemies with the Government, on whatever grounds".

This could be alluding generally to the racial drumming of Perkasa, Utusan Malaysia and even Dr

Mahathir Mohamad that has contributed to racial tension of late, and specifically to Perkasa's role in inflaming the Bersih 2.0 rally by wanting to counter it and issuing veiled threats of violence.

The reaction on the part of Bersih 2.0 is to seek an audience with the King. Opposition political parties have indicated that they want to be included, but on no account must Bersih 2.0 allow this. It has all this while maintained that it is a movement that is led and initiated by civil society; it should remain so.

If the King grants the audience, what Bersih 2.0 might request is for him to advise the prime minister to initiate negotiations with it and the Election Commission on carrying out electoral reform. If this is not forthcoming, Bersih 2.0 should still have the option of holding its rally on July 9.

But what if the King does not grant Bersih 2.0 an audience soon enough? This would then pose a quandary for the NGO. Should it then proceed with the rally on July 9? When it comes to that, Bersih 2.0 would have to answer the ultimate question: Does it listen to the King or to the rakyat?

Ours is a constitutional monarchy; on political matters, the King can offer advice but it is up to the listener to accept it or not. However, many Malaysians are still infected with a feudal mentality and to them, going against the King's advice is tantamount to derhaka.

It is this that Bersih 2.0 will have to guard against, because if it were to be branded penderhaka, a fair part of the sympathy it has been getting so far through the government crackdown will be obliterated.

On the other hand, it could be comforted by the thought that Perkasa and Umno Youth have said that if Bersih 2.0 goes ahead with its rally, they would also go ahead with theirs. This would expose them to accusations of menderhaka as well, so Bersih 2.0 would not be alone.

However, the best course for everyone might well be negotiation, at which a timetable should be set for the electoral reform process to take place, before the next general election is held. But before going to the negotiating table, Bersih 2.0 should be given due recognition, which means Hishammuddin must revoke his order of illegalising it.

This is a prerequisite; otherwise it will make the government look silly negotiating with an "illegal" organisation. But even if Hishammuddin refuses to admit his high-handed mistake, Bersih 2.0 may have already been legitimised by the King's call for "consultations", and of course, by Najib's offer of holding the rally in a stadium.

Furthermore, the six PSM detainees should be released immediately, and the charges against the other 24 PSM members dropped. As it is, charging them with associating with an illegal society does not seem right. Bersih 2.0 was declared illegal several days after they were arrested; how could they have looked into the future to predict it would become illegal?

The next few days will be interesting to watch. The clash of wills between Bersih 2.0 and the government (with Perkasa and Umno Youth as secondary players) may now be raised to a higher level.

Najib may not want to give in for fear of appearing weak, and Bersih 2.0 may feel it has right and the rakyat on its side.

It will take an impartial referee who has the country's best interests at heart to arbitrate the matter and bring about a satisfying solution.

KEE THUAN CHYE is the author of 'March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up', which won 3rd prize in the Popular Readers' Choice Awards. It has also been translated into Chinese.