

Bersih 2.0: A long march to freedom
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ANTIDOTE The new sanitised Bersih 2.0 rally is now purer and whiter. Thanks to the Agong's intervention, the rally for free and fair elections will be confined to a stadium.

This change of scene will make the rally easier to control, from premier Najib Abdul Razak's point of view. It will also dampen some of the supporters' enthusiasm.

Being hemmed in, demonstrators will inevitably curb some of their long suppressed drive to show their defiance of the ruling coalition and its faithful enforcers in the police force.

The impact of the rally will diminish somewhat. Such a gathering in a stadium will reinforce images of spectator sports. We are, however, accustomed to watching displays of titanic struggles, such as football matches and general elections, even if we understand that the results are likely to be fixed by some cartel of tycoons.

Najib has succeeded in taking some of the sting out of the rally. He has manoeuvred Bersih 2.0 into a stadium, even if he has not forced the dissidents completely into a corner.

Najib may think, reasonably enough, that confining the rally to an enclosed space will play more to Umno's advantage than having Bersih 2.0 call off the rally altogether. If the rally does not proceed, suppressed resentment might then spill over into anti-establishment votes in the upcoming general election.

After all, Umno supporters might argue, if Najib does not like what he hears at the rally, he could arrange for all the gates to be sealed, and the protestors would be trapped inside. (The Emergency Ordinance could always be applied en masse.

Since a fair number of Bar Council human rights lawyers would be trapped inside, the police would be unable to deny legal advice as it has done to the PSM6.) Perhaps Umno could even issue a licence to some well-connected company to sell tickets to the rally.

It is harder now to understand why Bersih 2.0 organisers have been vilified, and portrayed in the state-owned media as illegal and violent. Yet they are encouraged to hold a rally in a public place.

The Bersih 2.0 committee has even been accused of taking foreign funding, embracing communism, and paving the way for an American invasion, all at once. Why will Umno now allow them to do all this in a stadium?

Playing the King of Hearts

The royal advice to confine the rally to a stadium is clearly binding. The present feeling among the Malay majority - Umno, PAS and PKR members alike - seems to be that the institution of the monarchy commands a special place in our hearts.

The royalty serves as an anchor of culture and identity, and provides a link to a more secure, if perhaps poorly understood, past. This serves to give comfort in an increasingly confusing and heterogeneous world.

Several of my highly educated and well travelled Malay friends are angry at endemic corruption, suppression of basic liberties, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in Malaysia.

Yet they still feel the Agong remains 'above politics', and beyond reproach, and they support the Agong's call for the Bersih 2.0 climbdown.

Therefore, now that the Agong has spoken, Bersih 2.0 clearly cannot risk uncertainty and divisions in the ranks of marchers, most of whom are expected to be Malay.

Disagreement would inevitably spread among the many individual members of the Bersih 2.0 coalition, if it were to press ahead with its plans to march to the national palace against the Agong's advice.

Over the past two years, we have clearly seen an increasing number of public expressions of royal feeling over issues like the Perak putsch, or the Selangor water wars, and now the Bersih 2.0 rally.

Perhaps these interventions are a sign of the times, and we can seek to understand them as reactions to our unprecedented political firestorm in 2008.

Indeed, all over the world, constitutional monarchies are conservative in nature, and most remain engaged in a troubling search for a new identity. Malaysia needs many more years to work out our own equilibrium.

The long march of history

Umno has pulled out all the stops to try to prevent a huge outpouring of public opinion, as we witnessed in 2007. The first Bersih rally galvanised the opposition and swept Pakatan to power in five states in 2008.

The first Bersih protest came as a surprise to Malaysians, including those taking part in a public demonstration for the first time. The rally encouraged many younger Malaysians to contribute to a groundswell of anti-BN voting.

But today, all of us are aware of the tidal wave of feeling against corruption, racial and religious extremism and institutional brutality. Three months ago, the surge in the anti-BN vote in the Sarawak election, rising to 45 percent, demonstrated this clearly.

Now, thanks to the outcry against the police clampdown and abuse of Bersih 2.0 activists including elected representatives, even more voters will already have got the message, with or without a second mammoth street rally.

It is entirely possible that enormous numbers of protestors will still turn up. Najib's gambit, throwing in all his resources, may not pay off.

The combined weight of all the institutions, including the monarchy, the judiciary, the police, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, the state-run media, the universities, the religious authorities, the civil service, and even the armed forces, cannot hold back history.

We have learnt that the will of the people eventually prevails. We can see this from recent events Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and now Thailand.

Malaysians with hopes and ideals need not despair, for we have seen throughout history that brute force cannot extinguish the people's spirit.

KERUAH USIT is a human rights activist - anak Sarawak, bangsa Malaysia. This weekly column is an effort to provide a voice for marginalised Malaysians. Keruah Usit can be contacted at keruah_usit@yahoo.com