

Round 2 of tug-of-wills goes to Bersih
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COMMENT The ongoing tug-of-wills between Bersih and the government turned this week into a game of feint-and-manoeuve in which the first round appeared to go to the government, mainly because of the latter's orneriness.

But the pendulum has swung back Bersih's way because of its decision, announced late yesterday, that the NGO won't be swayed in its determination to hold its rally - peacefully, it has always emphasised - at the Merdeka Stadium this Saturday.

Bersih had responded in good faith to the king's intervention early this week that was aimed at heading off a confrontation between the electoral reform pressure group and its adversaries - Perkasa and the police.

Bersih took the royal hint and requested for an audience to seek the king's advice.

Presumably, at the behest of the constitutional monarch who granted the audience on Tuesday, Bersih called off its street rally scheduled for Saturday, opting instead for a gathering in a stadium on the same day.

It must be recalled that the government had long urged Bersih to hold its rally in a stadium.

But Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak decided yesterday - in a move that typified his shiftiness on matters of principle - to pussyfoot on that earlier call and pass the buck of responsibility for approval of the gathering to the police.

To be sure, Bersih does not need a police permit to hold its gathering. That right is implicit in the Merdeka Constitution.

An arbitrary overlay of repressive legislation, passed during Umno-BN's stultifying domination of Parliament, had come to shroud the freedom of speech and assembly guarantees in the Merdeka Constitution.

A return to the bedrock guarantees of that constitution is what the entire reform movement in Malaysia, now 13 years in gestation, is ultimately driving towards.

Which is why Bersih's decision to hold its much-travailed rally at the Merdeka Stadium, where the independence of the country was proclaimed on Aug 31, 1957, is of momentous significance.

By the choice of location for its rally, by the meaning and significance of its reform agenda, Bersih has regained the initiative it seemingly lost in the gap between its deference to the king and the Najib administration's apparent desire to play fast and loose with its word.

In an ever-fluid situation, Bersih has regained the momentum it had built up until the king, employing the unifying symbolism of his office, interjected to head off a looming confrontation between the pressure group and Perkasa, with the police in the role of supposed neutral-turned-repressive partisan.

Ball in government's court

In this weeks' old battle of serve and return between Bersih and its adversaries which has revolved round the question of whether the pressure group could hold its rally peacefully, a notional moral ledger had opened up whereby both Bersih and its interlocutors had sought to score points before an appraising public.

When Perkasa and its chief, Ibrahim Ali, fulminated against the rally and threatened dire consequences,

Bersih tallied up a high mark on that ledger.

Repressive detentions by the police and asinine pronouncements by Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein only served to inflate Bersih's moral score.

But when the king interjected with a plea for moderation, Bersih's trajectory felt a crimp, but it recovered by gallantly abiding by His Majesty's behest.

Bersih immediately shifted its rally plans from street readiness to stadium mode but the government, marinated in reactionary obtuseness, responded with the pussyfooting that only a bold hurling of the gauntlet can serve notice of patience's limits.

Bersih, by saying that it will rally on Saturday and at the Merdeka Stadium, has kicked the ball into the government's court.

The latter, already short on the moral calculus in this tug-of-wills, is in danger of coming up even shorter if it refuses to grant to the rally an approval it can no longer withhold.

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