

July 9 rally: Gov't at panic stations
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COMMENT "God is on the side of the big battalions," Napoleon Bonaparte once famously observed.

That was when he was poised to take over Europe but when hubris led to his defeat and exile to Corsica, he had reason to ruefully reflect on his fellow Frenchman, Talleyrand's, equally famed aphorism: "The only thing you cannot do with a bayonet is sit on it."

The big battalions are on the side of the powers-that-be with just a day to go before Bersih's planned gathering, the venue for which they have switched, at the king's reasonably inferred request, from Kuala Lumpur's streets to Merdeka Stadium.

But the police, in a move that is clearly at odds with nonverbal signals emanating from His Majesty, have shaped to shut down the city to the marchers that the pressure group have for weeks been promising to summon in huge numbers to their electoral reform banner.

But, clearly, the moral battalions are ranged on Bersih's side of the anticipated face-off, as an obviously panicked government, backed by the men in blue, tries every evasive trick in the book to prevent a watching public from appraising the size of a gathering that would be a harbinger of the way the vote would go at the next general election.

However, as the diplomat Talleyrand mused, you can sustain your hold on power with chemical-laced water cannons, truncheons and bayonets, but you can't really sit on them.

Not for long. That is why even if a hectored, bullied and arrest-threatened Bersih, at the eleventh hour, were to call off their gathering that they have vowed to hold at the Merdeka Stadium, they would have achieved a moral victory.

This is because the government has clearly been seen to be in breach of protocols – royal, democratic and constitutional – in its public and private wrangles with Bersih in the weeks leading to the NGO's planned gathering for tomorrow.

In these highly publicised wrangles, the emperor has been seen to have no clothes, as the saying has it.

In attempting to head off a gathering, whose size could ring its death knell at the next general election, the government hectored, threatened, manipulated and, finally, resorted to arrests and, finally, banishments, to keep from public view something that could well be a portent of things to come at the next polls.

Rebellion against the king

A few weeks ago, Prime Minister Najib Razak exhorted a gathering of some 8,000 people – a number that his propagandists desperately tried to inflate to seven figures – to defend Putrajaya at all costs.

His use of martial terms was interpreted as an ominous sign that his government, beleaguered by scandal and ineptitude, may resort to extra-parliamentary means to stay in power.

Thus far their attitude towards Bersih's march has confirmed those interpretations to be prescient. In particular, initial moves to arraign six detained Parti Sosialis Malaysia activists for rebellion against the king suggested that paranoia had taken over certain sections of the police force.

Further reports that weapons were seized by police from people detained for their connections to the Bersih march reinforced the melodrama.

All this was being played out against a background of anti-Bersih hysteria that was steadily being drummed up by Utusan Malaysia, the editorial equivalent of Ibrahim Ali, the rabble-rousing Perkasa chief.

PM Najib's failure to smother these founts of sedition was compounded by his shocking endorsement of them when he described Bersih chairperson Ambiga Sreenivasan as anti-Islam because she had at one time been counsel to Muslim apostate Lina Joy. It was an odious misconstruction of a lawyer's professional duties.

BN has fear written all over it

Amidst the tumult and the baying from Perkasa and Utusan, Bersih kept its head, focused on the dramatisation of its eight demands which if implemented would conduce to clean and fair elections.

As a demonstration of its intent to play within constitutionally mandated rules, Bersih was acquiescent to the king's expressed concern about the wisdom of its planned street march.

It shifted gears and opted to hold its march in Stadium Merdeka, exploiting the venue's historical resonance for Bersih's long-term goal which is to revive the spirit and substance of the country's Merdeka Constitution.

That constitution has been more honoured in the breach than in the observance by Umno-BN, a trait that was in abundant display by the Najib administration in its craven response to the challenge mounted by Bersih in the last few weeks.

That response has had fear written all over it till the whole government is suffused by it. It has hit the panic button and ceded Bersih a moral victory even before its supporters have assembled to place their marching shoes on the ground.

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