

**The revolution now has a name: Bersih  
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About two weeks ago, Malaysians were still hopeful that the urbane Najib Razak would engage with the 62 NGOs under the Bersih 2.0 umbrella and demonstrate to the country that the Barisan Nasional was capable of taking the wind out of their sails through dialogue and mature discussions.

Instead, by allowing right-wing groups to scupper any possibility of an intelligent dialogue, the BN lost every advantage it had as the ruling coalition.

Perhaps the government wanted to convince Malaysians that it had to consider the opposite view. That there were groups who felt elections were “free and fair”. The reality is that these groups were not particularly successful in making their case.

They were fond of shouting, gathering in front of the offices of political organisations and threatening to burn it down. In an extreme case, these so-called anti-Bersih groups threatened ethnic explosions telling the Chinese to stay home.

Perkasa, Umno Youth, silat exponents and even one Chinese martial arts grandmaster (yes, it got that silly) – may like to think of themselves as symbols of Malay identity (somehow the grandmaster as well) – but their coming together to back the government did not seem to have done any good for the BN.

In fact, Ibrahim Ali even threatened MCA and Gerakan, reminding these senior coalition parties that they now depended on Malay votes and to shut their mouths if they wanted to survive in the next general election. All this ethnic chest-beating did not endear the BN or bolster the 1Malaysia spirit.

**Bogeymen galore**

Then the personal attacks started on Bersih's leaders, particular S Ambiga, the former Bar Council president and a recipient of a UN award. It began with name-calling and then death-threats.

It turned racial and when that did not work, she was branded “anti-Islam”. Apparently, even the PM participated in the name-calling, where in Kelantan he apparently labelled Ambiga “anti-Islam”. Badly advised, Ambiga was wrongly linked to the Lina Joy case. This was just too much, prompting Marina Mahathir to wade into the arena condemning those who called Ambiga names such as being “badly brought up”.

But perhaps strangest of all - please remember that these acts were supposed to strike fear into the hearts of the rakyat - Parti Sosialis Malaysia leaders (PSM is registered with the Registrar of Societies) were arrested and accused of attempting to wage war on the Agong by wearing T-shirts with the faces of Chin Peng, Rashid Mydin and others.

**They are still being held under Emergency Ordinance.**

And then, anyone wearing a yellow T-shirt with a Bersih logo became suspect. Unfortunately for the Seberang Jaya Municipal Council workers their uniform is yellow and their motto is 'Bersih'. But wait a minute - how can Bersih be an illegal rally if the said crime had not been committed yet? Never mind, reason left this country quite some time ago.

From the beginning, Bersih had asked all political parties to join in and support the call for “clean and fair elections” but the BN did not respond. Pakatan Rakyat was more responsive, prompting the government to label Bersih as an opposition Trojan horse.

On this front too, the BN lost the plot. Instead of engaging with Bersih on issues of evidence, the government decided to label them as part of the opposition agenda.

## **Absence of intelligent discourse**

Then the Election Commission (EC) came into the picture, giving a press conference that really showed that they were not particularly sophisticated. By not engaging with civil society in an intelligent manner – based on evidence and sound arguments – the BN was unwittingly admitting that elections may not be clean or free.

The mainstream press went into overdrive. It brought out pro-BN pundits like Chandra Muzaffar, who immediately linked Bersih to Anwar Ibrahim and the opposition leader's insatiable lust for power and his problems.

Perhaps, Chandra may not realise this but Anwar Ibrahim is no longer the man or the force he was in 1998. With or without Pakatan support, Bersih was going forward. If he had a Facebook account, he would have known that many were already wearing the 'illegal' Bersih badge.

Not to be outdone, the inspector general of police (IGP) announced that the police suspected that Bersih was being funded by foreign elements. Bank Negara was asked to help in tracing the money trail.

Most likely, the police must have realised that even their own officers did not believe them. Hence another dinosaur was brought into the papers to say that communist elements would take advantage of Bersih. So now the government tune was that what Bersih wanted was not bad in itself but it had been taken over by the opposition and the communists.

Having lost the middle class support completely, the only thing left was to break Bersih. Even this was not done well. To Umno's surprise, the Agong waded into the picture and granted Bersih an audience.

The PM then went on national television saying that Bersih could gather at a stadium. As the walk was planned to take place in KL, naturally the stadium Bersih picks would also be in KL. The next day however, Najib back-tracked and the cabinet decided that no stadium in KL was to be used.

## **Rallying for kotor?**

On Friday, the eve of the Bersih walk, the Selangor Sultan said that he did not support such demonstrations, quickly ending the stadium option in Selangor. So, the streets it was. By this time, Perkasa and Umno Youth also promised huge anti-Bersih rallies. The PM conveniently left the whole issue to the police. It was not a very courageous thing to do.

So, KL was literally locked-down from Friday and the TV stations focused on the hardships faced by traders because of Bersih. Here the messaging is clear: your daily bread is more important than some imagined basic rights.

But the government has forgotten that inflation is very high, the economy may have grown tremendously but there is little trickle-down effect and food prices are at an all time high. So, clean elections are important and a lot of people know this.

Yet, despite all the heavy-handedness of the police, thousands took to the streets. The mainstream press may not reflect the enormity of what just transpired and the PM may commend the police force for their loyalty but he will not be calling elections any time soon. In fact, he will now have to deal with a most unhappy country.

It is back to the drawing board for the BN. It has to figure out how it just lost the middle class?

Although one good thing did emerge: it was definitely a 'One Malaysia' movement. Young and old, of whatever ethnicities, all came out to exercise their democratic rights. The revolution sparked by Bersih will now spread throughout the country.

We just need to make sure we have a chance to make our votes count in the next general election. By this I mean “free and fair” elections.

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