

Najib in for winter of discontent
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The tenor of events the past week has upended the maxim that a week is a long time in politics, as former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once famously observed.

A week would seem a long span in politics only if actors in the drama pirouette in unexpected ways. If they remain frozen in their original stances, time would seem to flit by.

The week from the 'March for Democracy' on July 9 till now is notable for the stagnancy in the protagonists' positions.

Umno-BN is frozen in its stance of sterile denial over the demonstration and related events, while the opposition maintains that it has hit such chord among the general populace that the powers-that-be are at a loss to explain evident public support for Bersih's electoral reform agenda.

Unfortunately for the deniers, a host of contentions is set to make the embers from the preceding week's demonstration glow for some time.

The smoldering embers that could singe the government's cover are whether tear gas was fired into the Tung Shin hospital compound; the question of who is culpable for the death of a Bersih demonstrator; and reports by the protestors backed by video footage that they were brutalised by the cops.

Human rights body Suhakam has announced that it will hold a public inquiry into the protestors' complaints. The police say they are open to an investigation of their conduct.

These developments, against the backdrop of Prime Minister Najib Razak's arguments that the police were lenient rather than harsh on protestors, will make the happenings of July 9 reverberate in the public's consciousness until the next general election.

The ripples are more likely to undermine the government's popularity although Najib expressed optimism that voters' verdict in the approaching general election would vindicate Umno-BN.

Snap polls likely to be put off

From a position of playing off its front foot after three successive by-election victories, Umno-BN has been driven back on its heels by setbacks in the Sarawak state polls in April and by the folly of its patently failed repression of the Bersih event a week ago.

riote police firing tear gas in bersih rally big 2Before the Bersih march, Najib was reputed as preparing to call a snap poll by the middle of this year, or just after the Budget which is scheduled for unveiling in late September.

But the effect of electoral setbacks in Sarawak and now the public relations disaster of its abortive repression of the Bersih march have placed Umno-BN in a position where another deferment of the polls date is warranted.

The question now is whether time would revive Umno-BN's prospects, or would it unveil more surprises that would further imperil Umno-BN?

With controversies arising from the Bersih march gnawing at its heels, with potentially damaging disclosures from a graft probe in France over Malaysia's arms purchases that are likely to be unfavourable to Najib, and with Sodomy II resuming its wobbly course after the sex video caper has petered out due to its inherent implausibility, Umno-BN appears headed for further downward spirals to its fortunes.

Add to this bog, the burden of rising costs of living and heightened strains to the fiscal situation from a spiraling subsidy bill, the Najib administration is faced with debilitating difficulties.

Imelda Marcos-like extravagance

The contagion of ailments appears illimitable: the clamour among disgruntled Felda settlers over the agency's allegedly gigantic misuse of funds, and unabated public suspicion of dark doings in the deaths of DAP aide Teoh Beng Hock and Customs officer Sarbaini Ahmad, scarcely round off the picture of broad and wide ranging malaise.

Recurrent deaths in police custody, the unconscionable detention of the 'PSM Six' under the Emergency Ordinance 1969, and the drip-drip of revelations of Imelda Marcos-like extravagance of the PM's wife, give ballast to the opposition argument that the ruling coalition is beyond redemption.

Sure, the coast is not all clear for the opposition, what with the Kedah Pakatan Rakyat state government banning entertainment outlets from operating during Ramadan, a move that inveterate rabble rouser, Utusan Malaysia, latched on with the delirium of parched travelers finding water in an inhospitable desert.

But Kedah PAS quickly retracted the move to keep the opposition Pakatan's flanks relatively safe from counter fire by Umno-BN.

The tenor of events in the coming months is likely to be exempt from the unpredictable surprises that make a week a long time in politics.

Hence deferments in the timing of the next polls would make no difference to the Umno-BN position, caught as it is in a quagmire of rapidly diminishing credibility.

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