

Will 100,000 people show up for 901?

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Kee Thuan Chye

COMMENT Frankly, when I heard PKR deputy president Azmin Ali had announced that on Jan 9, Pakatan Rakyat would rally 100,000 people to show support for Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim at the verdict of his Sodomy II trial, I cringed. Not out of disgust, but out of apprehension.

To me, this kind of declaration of numbers is not necessary. In fact, it's foolhardy. It can backfire on the organisers. How would it look on them if the turnout did not meet the projected figure? Worse, what if the turnout was pathetically low? Even 10,000 would be considered a letdown - and getting 10,000 to show up is already a tall order.

Such a shortfall would be an embarrassment not only for Azmin but also for Pakatan and Anwar. Their credibility could suffer. And what might have been an occasion to shore up public support for Pakatan - that is, the conviction that is expected to be meted out to Anwar - could have an opposite effect.

NONE How feasible is it to get 100,000 on the streets for any cause? The turnout for Bersih 2.0 was less than half that. It may be argued that many more would have come forward if the police had not threatened the public and locked down Kuala Lumpur, but would the number have doubled? And even if it did, that rally was for electoral reform, a huge public issue.

When was the last time 100,000 people turned up at a rally? The one to protest against the Internal Security Act (ISA) in August 2009 had at most only 20,000, and that was a huge public issue too.

Last November, when the Bar Council staged its Walk for Freedom to protest against the Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011, only 2,000 took part, and half of them were lawyers.

Pakatan might do well to take a lesson from the experience of Himpun Sejuta Umat (Himpun) which boasted a projected attendance of one million at its anti-apostasy rally last October only to see 5,000 turn up.

To cover up its embarrassment, it declared the rally a "success". But whatever it might say, the public could judge that Himpun was nothing but hot air.

Size does matter but...

Of course, it was utterly stupid to say a million people would attend. Size does matter, but one should be realistic in making projections. There is nothing more damning than empty exaggeration.

I'm sceptical that Pakatan can round up 100,000 people on Jan 9, but I hope I'll be proven wrong. It will send shock waves to Putrajaya and scare the poop out of Prime Minister Najib Razak.

It will show the Malaysian public that Pakatan lives up to what it promises, and that it is together. It will show that it is a force to be reckoned with and tremendously boost its chances at the next general election.

But I'm sceptical because I think people are getting tired of rallies. More important, there needs to be a strong focus to the rally, and as it stands, showing support for Anwar is the focus.

NONE As such, apart from PKR members - and surely not all of them - and his supporters in Pakatan partners PAS and the DAP, plus some from the public who have great affection for him, who else will be moved to take leave from their jobs (unless they are self-employed, retired or jobless) and brave the traffic and the police to make their presence felt?

I won't go the Raja Petra Kamarudin (RPK) way and say that Anwar is headed for irrelevance. I think he is still the hope for many Malaysians who want to see a change in government.

And day by day, the call for change is getting increasingly urgent, almost to the point where change is mandatory. You read it in social media, in online news portals; you hear it discussed in private groups and public forums; you see it in the emergence of groups like ABU (Asalkan Bukan Umno/Anything But Umno) and in Mohd Ariff Sabri Aziz and Aspan Alias leaving Umno to join the DAP.

Of course, there are also those who have given up on Anwar or who still don't trust him even though they want change, but I think he remains a key figure who is crucial to Pakatan's bid to win Putrajaya.

Pakatan may have lately met to decide on his replacement as its leader if he should go to prison, but will that person have his charisma and be able to galvanise the disparate forces to form a united front against the BN machinery? Even from prison, would his aura and spirit not emanate to inspire Pakatan's cause?

Still, is support for Anwar being the focus of the Jan 9 rally enough to bring out 100,000 people?

Causes other than Anwar

Other causes have been touted for it to give greater justification for the public to take part, mainly proposed by people outside of the political parties concerned.

These include showing defiance against the Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011, showing disgust for the judiciary because of its lack of independence, telling the government off for the way it has been treating the people, but these can only serve to blur the focus. And it's not easy to rally people when the focus is diffused.

Given this and the difficulty of producing the promised 100,000, would it not be more prudent to let the public respond to the conviction (if it comes) without the hoo-ha and hoopla of a rally?

NONEWould it not be just as effective for them to decide for themselves in their own private way the ramifications of the verdict? If they are happy, unhappy or indifferent about it, would a rally change their feeling?

Is it not advisable for Azmin to now declare that Pakatan will let the court take its course and withdraw its earlier intent to respond to the verdict in a public rally? Would Pakatan not look gracious for doing so? Would Anwar not come out looking better for abiding by the court's decision? Would it not ease the tension that has been building up and win public approval for Pakatan?

My sympathies are with freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, and I advocate rallies when rallies are necessary. But accompanying these must be a strong sense of responsibility.

That includes living up to what one promises, and being sure that the cause is for the greater good. Without this, the rally might actually hurt the cause. And in this case, it could extend to hurting Pakatan.

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