

**Polls reform: Gov't poised on the brink**  
**MalaysiaKini.com**  
**April 03, 2012**  
**By Terence Netto**

COMMENT Today Parliament will debate its select committee's (PSC) report on electoral reform.

Already, the three Pakatan Rakyat MPs on the panel have notified the House speaker of their dissatisfaction with the report and intention to attach a minority report to the committee's 22-page document.

NONEThe Pakatan trio's main grouse is that the panel has not addressed the outstanding issue raised by electoral reform pressure group, Bersih, whose successful demonstration of July 9 last year forced the government to set up a parliamentary select committee on the matter.

After six months of study and meetings on the issue, the panel headed by Maximus Ongkili will table its report today.

And already, judging from the initial reaction of the Pakatan MPs on the panel and from vibes emanating from Bersih sources, the select committee's endeavour to bring closure to the issue is headed for failure.

The word on the grapevine is that Bersih has begun plans to stage what would be its third public march to exert pressure for electoral reform later this month.

Even a successful attachment of a minority report to the PSC's main one would not be able to head off this march, should Bersih's key demand that the rolls be cleaned up is not placated.

A third march would underscore the total futility of the entire government exercise in allaying public concern over electoral discrepancies that have been festering over the last year.

Another confrontation

Because a general election is the final arbiter of distempers in the body politic, a clean electoral register is the key to the whole issue of whether the exercise of the vote is free and fair.

Just the fact that there are some 80,000 people registered in just over 300 addresses in the electoral register are enough grounds to make imperative a clean-up of the rolls by a body independent of the Election Commission.

NONEThis is the best way to avert another confrontation between the government and electoral pressure group Bersih.

We are in the immediate prelude to the 13th general election. It has been said so often about it that the description is in danger of becoming a cliché - the poll is the most critical in our country's history.

The number 13 is imbedded in the national psyche as a figure with sinister connotations because of its connection with the May 13 riots of 1969 that followed in the wake of the country's 3rd general election held that year.

The signs point that the number's infamy would be reinforced should the government of Prime Minister Najib Razak decide to go ahead with the 13th general election without a clean-up of the electoral rolls - the principal demand of Bersih.

Will the gov't commit a second folly?

Bersih is going to ratchet up the tempo of public pressure for a clean-up of the rolls should the government railroad the PSC's report through the House without the attachment of the minority report.

In other words, the confrontation of last July, which surprised the powers-that-be by the size and racial diversity of the crowds Bersih drew to its banner, will be re-enacted.

NONEMore iconic figures like 'Aunty Ooi' (centre in photo) of 'Lady of Liberty' fame would likely well up from the depths of public concern over this pivotal issue of our times.

Last July, the government sailed into the confrontation, blithely indifferent to the magnitude of public concern over the need for electoral reform.

The size and relative youth of the crowds that turned up for another emotive public issue, the anti-Lynas rally in Kuantan in February, also took the authorities by surprise.

A public long roused to awareness of an issue of signal importance they feel the authorities are attempting to defuse with placatory measures that are a sham is not likely to relent in its opposition.

With protest phenomena such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street blowing subversive ripples of resonance across the face of benighted regimes in parts of Asia, the government here should not commit a second folly to follow upon the first faux pas last July when they underestimated Bersih's power to galvanise public support.

The government is poised on the brink of another probable miscalculation should it misread public support for electoral reform.

The least it has to do in the circumstances is to clean up the polls register. It cannot call a general election with the discrepancies that taint the existing ledger.



