

Gov't mixes rough stuff with the smooth
MalaysiaKini.com
April 07, 2012
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COMMENT Is the government twining a clenched fist with a velvety touch in its approach to Bersih's latest hurling of the gauntlet of electoral reform?

That initially appears to be the case from the sequence of events of the last few days.

Within days of Bersih's announcement it will stage a sit-down protest on April 28, the government, perhaps mindful of how things backfired on it the last time, has seemingly adopted a different strategy towards the NGO's latest demarche.

Whereas it was outright intimidation that marked their response towards Bersih's march of last July, it looks like the government is mixing ingratiation with intimidation in its approach to the electoral reform pressure group's most recent public challenge.

Of course, as cover the intimidation part is being outsourced to Perkasa.

NONE In an immediate response to Bersih's announcement of its intention to stage the sit-down protest, the right-wing Malay lobby warned Muslims not to take part.

Then, in an apparent offer of an olive branch to Bersih, de facto law minister Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz (right) said he had submitted the minority report opposition MPs had tried unsuccessfully to attach to the parliamentary select committee's main report to the cabinet for consideration at its meeting yesterday.

The minority report which Parliament speaker Pandikar Amin Mulia had peremptorily rejected contained opposition MPs' objections to the failure of the PSC report to concede the polls reform measures that Bersih has long championed.

By saying he has tendered the minority report to the cabinet, Nazri was trying to placate public disappointment over the PSC report which critics contend makes a sham of its six-month exercise of holding public hearings in quest of electoral reform.

A brazen warning by its surrogate, Perkasa, is followed by a measure of propitiation by a government minister trying to throw a damper on public discontent.

Change of strategy

This two-toned approach does mark a change from the government's strategy towards Bersih's march of July last year.

But the change appears to be prompted by a desire to vary the tactics in quest of a government objective that is surely aimed at ensuring that Bersih 3.0 turns out to be a failure.

Success for Bersih 3.0, on the scale its predecessor obtained on July 9 last year, would be disastrous for Prime Minister Najib Razak who is seeking popular endorsement at the 13th general election said to be imminent.

Bersih 2.0 was widely perceived to have been badly mishandled by the Najib administration.

NONE At that time, from the outset, the Najib administration had attempted to hobble the planned march with all manner of trammels, from verbal warnings to preventive arrests, the most bizarre of which were

the arrests of six Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) activists for - among the initial charges bandied about - inciting rebellion against the king!

This ham-fisted approach boomeranged badly on the government.

On the day of the march, the size and racial diversity of the crowds that waxed in the face of a massive police presence firing tear gas and water cannons was startling, deflating government's hopes that Bersih would be exposed as an elitist NGO dancing to the tune of opposition maestro, Anwar Ibrahim.

Instead the demonstration posted signs that were unmistakably clear: Electoral reform is a hot button issue with the people.

Outright intimidation failed

The government's mishandling of Bersih 2.0 drew flak not only from the usual suspects, but also from hitherto discreet dissenters within its clique who went public with their misgivings about the Najib administration's handling of not only the march but also the entire issue of freedom to dissent.

Combined with criticism from foreign circles, most tellingly semaphored by the yellow-coloured gown worn by Queen Elizabeth II when she granted an audience to the visiting Najib at Buckingham Palace, the government found itself firmly on the rack over its handling of the public demonstration.

NONENajib attempted to retrieve matters by announcing on Malaysia Day (Sept 16) that a raft of liberalising measures was on the cards which he said would put the country on the road to being the "best democracy".

The problem about hyperbolic projections on behalf of planned reforms is that when the reality does not measure up, public misgivings about government sincerity follows.

Allowing this letdown to happen once too often, as the government now has with the PSC report on polls reform which follows the sham of the Public Assembly Bill 2011 that was tabled and passed late last year, makes a mockery of Najib's "best democracy" aspiration.

Hence the government has to tread cautiously in handling the planned Bersih sit-down protest, especially with the general election in mind.

It now appears it is paddling safer than it did last July with the adoption of a two-toned approach.

Outright intimidation had failed the last time. It remains to be seen whether a brickbats mixed with bouquets approach would bring a softer landing for the government this time.

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