

## **Eyeball to eyeball: Who's going to blink?**

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COMMENT "We were eyeball to eyeball and the other guy just blinked," was the memorable remark by US secretary of state Dean Rusk about the Cuban missile crisis exactly a half century ago.

Minus the cosmic implications of the United States confrontation with the Soviet Union then, Rusk's metaphor serves nicely as description of the looming confrontation between Bersih and the powers-that-be at the Dataran Merdeka on Saturday.

A clash had, initially, seemed avoidable.

NONEThis was when Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein (right) signaled a fortnight ago that Bersih could go ahead with the planned protest, provided they staged it in a place other than Dataran Merdeka.

Bersih co-chair Ambiga Seenivasan quickly demurred at the proviso.

When that demurrer was met with the usual vituperative rejoinders from the anti-Ambiga clique found in sections of the government-controlled media, Perkasa, Hasan Ali's Jati, latterly joined by disgruntled elements of PAS, things turned from the mildly promising to the dismally familiar.

Soon the recognisably dour patterns of the past reasserted its preponderance over the refreshingly new.

The licensing authorities, after initially feinting in the direction of acquiescence, withdrew to the forbidding form of what one had - albeit feeble - grounds to hope was the past.

Pretty soon, it became quite clear a dour entrenched legacy is difficult to shed overnight.

Expect a lockdown again

In the last 24 hours, the police have joined Kuala Lumpur City Hall in declining to give permission to Bersih to hold their planned sit-down protest, called for 2pm on Saturday.

From day one of their announcement that they would demonstrate, the Bersih stance was that a right to stage a peaceful protest ought not to be made to abide by any abridgement.

Both KL City Hall and the police's refusal to give the green light only means that the Bersih demonstrators will go eyeball to eyeball with the police, especially if the latter attempt to replicate the lockdown they imposed on central Kuala Lumpur on July 9 last year when Bersih called a demonstration to press their agenda of electoral reform.

That lockdown and what happened as consequence have carved separate niches in local history.

On the one hand, it taught the authorities a lesson - apparently, not well learnt - in the futility of countermanding popular protest.

NONEOn the other hand, it left participants of the Bersih-organised march with a feel for the power of Victor Hugo's insight that greater than the tread of mighty armies is an idea whose time has come.

Today Bersih co-chair, national literary laureate A Samad Said, insisted the protest would go ahead as planned at the Dataran, with or without the acquiescence of the authorities.

The die has been further cast with the announcement by PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang that he will join the protest. He also urged party members to turn up in numbers.

It is a certainty that he will have the company of not only the top brass of his party, but also that of Pakatan Rakyat components DAP and PKR.

So eyeball to eyeball it's going to be.

Police may exhibit less crassness

Unless, of course, the police are bluffing or Bersih cannot summon the crowds they successfully did in November 2007, when the first edition of their push for polls reform took place in Kuala Lumpur, and last July 9, when they pulled off a repeat edition in the teeth of a massive police shutdown of central KL.

Expect in the next 72 hours that protest plans by Bersih would accelerate along careworn and confidential lines - certainly, on how the protest crowd is going to evade the police barricades that are almost certain to be thrown around the approaches to Dataran Merdeka.

Because this Bersih protest will be joined by the Himpunan Hijau movement set up by the anti-Lynas crowd, expect that vibrant young protesters would embroider the occasion with cameo roles as striking as Annie Ooi's, dubbed the 'Lady of Liberty', after impressive pictures emerged of her inspiring spontaneity.

Expect also that the police would exhibit less crassness than they did the last time in the methods they choose as crowd deterrence.

NONEA reliance on tear gas would likely be de-emphasised as would be the rushing of milling concentrations of people because they make for image-damaging videos that will surely feature in the news bulletins of the international networks.

The police would bend over backwards to prevent Bersih's third edition of their push for polls reform from becoming an international cause célèbre, like it did the last time.

It will be an eyeball to eyeball confrontation nevertheless, but this time with more wit on one side and less obtuseness on the other. Hopefully.

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