

Confrontation comes down to the wire
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COMMENT Like two prizefighters intent on proving their worth, the long running feud between Bersih and the Election Commission over the integrity of the electoral rolls comes down to the wire this Saturday for the third time in five years.

bersih rally 271207 02There was Bersih 1.0 on Nov 10, 2007, the first mass gathering for polls reform in Kuala Lumpur whose size was a an early signal of the changes to the political landscape ushered in by the general election held four months later.

There was Bersih 2.0 on July 9, 2011, a stirring demonstration of popular support for the same agenda, an exhibition that forced Prime Minister Najib Razak to announce he would introduce a raft of liberalising reforms as a response to populist pressure.

Alas, those reforms to laws affecting public demonstrations, internal security, a clean electoral register, and media freedoms, fell short of what the PM himself said he would like the country to be - the "best democracy."

The upshot: a third edition, called Bersih 3.0, is planned for staging, pitting the forces for reform in Malaysian politics and the forces affecting to make a pretense of reform.

Unless of course one side concedes, a showdown between Bersih and the powers-that-be is certain to eventuate on Saturday at the Dataran.

Historic venue

The venue, Dataran Merdeka, is historically resonant for a resolution of the argument between Bersih and the EC.

This is where Malaya's emancipation proclamation was read out by founding Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman as the clock in the tower at the iconic Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad chimed the midnight hour on Dec 30, 1957.

One can understand why Bersih is reluctant to shift the venue for their sit-down protest from the Dataran to, say, Merdeka Stadium close by.

The Merdeka proclamation, read out by the Tunku on the night, contained the charter of promises that ought to be delivered to a people being made independent.

tunku abdul rahman merdeka declaration 261004The Merdeka Stadium was later that morning (Aug 31, 1957) the scene for the reading out, again by the Tunku, of the declaration of independence.

The difference between a freedom charter and an independence declaration does not revolve on semantics alone.

The one contains pledges by which a nation intends to give meaning to its freedom; the other announces that freedom as empirical fact.

By insisting on the Dataran Merdeka as venue for their sit-down protest over the inadequacy of the EC's response to its long-running drive for polls reform, Bersih underscores the point that several freedoms vouchsafed in the Merdeka Proclamation remain to be delivered to Malaysians.

Needless to say, there can be no true emancipation for a country's citizens without the free and authentic exercise of the ballot.

Thus Dataran Merdeka on Saturday is set to become the metaphorical equivalent of Tahrir Square in Cairo, the venue of massed protests from January 2011 that set large swathes of the Arab world on fire for change.

If Bersih can summon a sizeable, racially mixed and generationally diverse gathering, then the momentum generated by the first gathering four and half years ago would be unstoppable.

The powers-that-be don't seem to understand that repression is oxygen to those striving to shed their shackles.

Also, the fact that repression is a contagious reflex is suggested by yesterday's announcement by the Kuala Lumpur mayor that Bersih would have to face the consequences of City Hall's disapproval of their planned sit-down protest at the Dataran.

A civil servant grandee is emulating the repressive accents normally reserved to the enforcement crowd in the police contingent.

Ambiga vs Khairy debate

By late evening yesterday, tell-tale signs that repression was going to be counterproductive were seen in the outsize crowds that turned up at a club in a city suburb to hear Bersih co-chair Ambiga Seenivasan debate Khairy Jamaluddin of Umno Youth.

NONEA sizeable number could not gain admission into the hall for they had not registered with the organisers, the Malay Mail, which hosted the debated.

This group clustered around two internal TV monitors in an adjoining passageway that featured the debate.

Although, volume-wise, the feed was not distinct, the standing crowd showed admirable patience in following the debate whose subject was the adequacy or rather its lack of polls reform, with Khairy playing the EC apologist and Ambiga its critic.

Khairy, ostensible representative of what passes for liberalism in Umno, dredged up recondite details purporting to show the EC as impartial referee.

Ambiga confined herself to secreting details of why EC impartiality is suspect.

The salience of one tidbit was incontrovertible. She revealed that PKR Lembah Pantai MP Nurul Izzah's agents had on successive weekends been arrested while on rounds in the constituency to verify residential details of voters on the ward register.

A monitoring exercise on successive weekends thwarted by the exercise of the police powers of the state. Sounds like some people haven't heard of the Merdeka proclamation by the country's progenitor and what it contained.

These is reason aplenty that the looming gathering at Dataran Merdeka this Saturday should be regarded as an imperative exercise in the recovery of a vital bit of historical memory.

