

High stakes for Bersih 3.0 rally
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COMMENT As the buzz surrounding Bersih grows louder, the stakes are rising. As the week began, many wrote off Bersih 3.0, suggesting that the outrage and momentum did not echo the sentiments of last July. They suggested that the playing the rally card again would backfire.

Yet, as the week unfolded, and with the DBKL's (City Hall's) response to the occupation of Dataran Merdeka and students calling for free tertiary education, the tide slowly began to turn. It was BN which appeared to be playing a bad hand.

NONE While there was a decentralisation of who was on the frontline for the BN this time, local authorities rather than national leaders, the end result was the same - a failure to address deep-seated concerns about electoral integrity and unwillingness to accept the protest that has arisen by the failure to address these concerns.

While many remain undecided, the ground is moving. Like the earlier two rallies, Bersih 3.0 has evolved into an event that captures a broad range of concerns, from the environment, religious rights, 1Care health insurance scheme and corruption to electoral reform and free education.

The core of these issues involves a call for better governance and greater consultation with Malaysians. This has been the central nerve of Malaysian politics since 1998-1999, as leaders who are seen to be engaging in reform win power and those who don't lose support.

This was the case in 2004 and 2008. The Bersih 3.0 rally will shape whether this will be the case in 2012 (or 2013).

Over the last few weeks, analysts have used online/social media and forums to highlight the need for electoral reform, pointing to serious problems in the electoral roll, electoral system, electoral rules and the independence of the Electoral Commission (EC).

By any measure and international standards, these problems are credible and cannot be dismissed. Many of these problems have been around for a long time; the EC's independence was lost in 1962, for example.

Gerrymandering and malapportionment have been serious issues for decades, and were exacerbated after the 1969 racial riots. What makes the 'old' issues more salient is the competitiveness of the upcoming polls, as these factors have been shown to influence outcomes in the past.

chart on gerrymandering 02

Malaysia has long been touted as an example of electoral authoritarianism, where the electoral system is used to buttress the support of the incumbent in power.

Foreigners could well decide GE

What makes electoral reform even more potent this time around is the changes that have been brought into the system since 2008, often without proper review or adequate debate.

Here is where the discussion of the electoral roll fits in. To my knowledge, there is no place in the world that allows this many foreigners to vote for the strategic purpose of winning office.

Few can understand why authorities would sell out the interests of its citizens as a whole by bringing in non-Malaysians to vote. This is especially hard to understand when so many Malaysians abroad are clamouring to vote, but were denied this by both the EC and Malaysian courts.

Strategic political citizenship is sadly not new in Malaysia's history, as Sabahans can attest to. Little attention is given on its long-term impact on the country's social fabric and the marginalisation of different communities as the right to vote is given to immigrants for political expediency.

Foreigners, new postal voters, procedures that limit transparency in voting and more have raised serious red flags about Malaysia's electoral processes and the sad fact is that if elections are held in these circumstances, the victory would not be a genuine one. It would be a hollow mandate fabricated through manipulation.

To use an analogy that football fans can understand, there is no longer a referee. The opposition has been told that they can only stand in their own side of the field and all the players in the incumbent team are offside near their rival's goal. This is not a fair fight, but a fixed one.

Where has the sense of integrity gone? Does the BN need a victory so bad that it would play on such an unlevel field?

The reason these issues are so important is, to quote Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, the next election will be "the mother of all elections".

Of the 222 seats up for grabs, I believe 170 are competitive - a swing of 10 percent either way will make a marked difference given the new configuration of younger voters and changing terrain. Of these 170 competitive seats, nearly 90 of these are "highly competitive" - meaning that in the fluid conditions of Malaysian politics, either side can win.

Up until Bersih, it was my view that BN had the advantage.

Prime Minister Najib Razak - through his hard work and use of finances (another problematic area in Malaysian elections - BR1M's cash handouts involved 5.3 million households at a cost of RM2.3 billion, for example) had made headway and was steering BN into a comfortable win, relying heavily on seats in Sabah and Sarawak.

While there were the unknowns of infighting within his party, Umno, the inability of the opposition to formulate a unified message and move beyond capitalising on negative angst against the BN and Umno, continued to work in BN's favour.

The big issue that boosted Najib was perceptions (not necessarily reality) that the economy was stronger than in 2008, as well as the impact of the attacks on Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Now, this dynamic is again in flux. The competition has risen sharply, as seats in the BN's hands are less secure. The recent questionable changes involving the electoral process are even more important, and contentious.

The battle for the middle ground

When Bersih 3.0 first began, it attracted the base that voted for the opposition, those that have already made up their minds.

The BN's response - a hardline one that denied access to Dataran Merdeka, showcased the use of the police via DBKL, involved denial of electoral problems through the EC's explanatory report as "anomalies" and even featured taxi drivers linked to BN in an appeal to move the venue elsewhere - involved three key elements:

- 1) Denial of problems.
- 2) A traditional attempt to tar the protesters as a threat to stability.
- 3) The failed attempt to use the racial card.

It mirrored the well-honed old political style. At its core, there are some in Umno who see similarities between Merdeka Square and Tahrir Square, and are worried this arena will be a focal point for change. These sort of concerns led to the siege mentality last July.

Yet, it has evolved into a new dynamic. To understand Malaysian politics today, it is important to appreciate its diversity and pluralism.

The days where power can be decided by a group of leaders meeting in private are gone. It is the people who have the power, not the politicians. Both sides are using numbers and people to win support. The BN-linked NGOs have come out to voice their own concerns, as have some of their beneficiaries. The opposition too is using its own links.

Yet this rally involves many politically-engaged Malaysians who are not tied directly to any party. Their focus is on the issues they represent. Many of these form what in political science is known as 'critical citizens' - those who view both sides with scepticism and want the system as a whole to improve.

This is what makes Bersih 3.0 so important, in that it is a reflection of Middle Malaysia - the middle ground led by critical citizens. In Middle Malaysia, there are four groups in particular that will shape the electoral outcome.

NONThe first is youth. Young voters are crucial in the results, as they make up at least two million of the new voters. They are distributed across seats, although disproportionately less likely to vote as they are outstation. Malaysia remains one of the handful of countries in Asia which have a voting age of 21, considerably higher than the global average and this disenfranchises its youth.

They have now become more politically active, reminiscent of the 1960s. Today the issue of free education and treatment of students has made Bersih 3.0 highly emotive among many younger Malaysians, and their turnout will be a test for how the ground is moving.

The second group is middle-class voters. Many of these individuals had never been to a protest before July 2011 and if they show up in high numbers, then it will highlight the challenge the government faces in winning over key opinion leaders in various communities.

These are the doctors, the civil servants, the bankers and clerks, the community leaders who have social capital and can shape opinions. They make up the heart of critical citizens, informed and engaged in issues.

The third group that will matter this time round will be the regional events nationally and internationally, especially in East Malaysia.

These are not only the 'fixed deposit' areas, but are where many of the electoral problems are most acute, especially foreigner voters. Greater activism outside of Kuala Lumpur will illustrate that the concerns are not confined to the urban core, but national (and international) in scope.

Finally, the fourth group that will matter is the police and other security groups such as Rela (Volunteers Corps), whose actions will reflect on their professionalism. A crackdown will only serve to reinforce the sense of unfairness and the need for better governance that is essentially underlying the Bersih 3.0 rally.

As such, tensions are high and anger has risen on both sides, making Bersih 3.0 more intense than earlier rallies.

Competition for reform within Umno

Even when the dust eventually settle on Bersih 3.0, another fault line in Malaysian politics will be showcased - the ability of Najib to showcase himself as the champion of reform.

After Bersih 2.0, he made promises and many of them took the form of new bills. Some of which opened up space and many of which only served to bring in more draconian measures. Whether it involved free assembly or electoral changes, the end result is that the measures introduced are not yet fundamentally about reform.

They focus on form not substance, taking away old laws such as the Internal Security Act, while introducing more questionable - although untested ones, such as the Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill. The same focus on form underscores the government's last-minute conciliatory offer of four alternative locations for Bersih 3.0.

NONEWhy this focus on form rather than substance? Cynics would suggest that this reflects the inability to trust Najib and his promises. Others would suggest that this reflects the reality in the system that he has to operate. He was a hardliner who is now claiming to be a reformer and/or adopting reformist rhetoric to win power. He is a product of Umno.

The majority of leaders in his party still are hardliners, and the handful of reformist leaders such as Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin are facing challenges inside the system, especially as they are showcased to defend the system they are in.

The bigger question that comes out of the handling of Bersih 3.0 will be whether Umno is capable of reforming.

What is interesting to date is that Najib has stayed largely out of the fray, handing over the spokesman role to his cousin, Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein. This issue is a national one and as a national leader, questions are being raised about his position.

He chose to go out of town in the last round, and the end result was that he came off as mishandling the event. Can he afford this again given that his campaign to date has been about his national leadership?

What happens tomorrow is not just about the opposition or Umno-BN. It is also not just about electoral reform, given the wide spectrum of concerns. Everyone will attempt to gain political capital.

Politically, Bersih 3.0 will reveal whether Malaysia will become more polarised or compromises can be reached. It will either provide momentum for the opposition, or signal an early election by Najib if turnout is low, in which he will win, in part due to the problems engendered in the system.

Ultimately this rally is not just about politics. The Bersih 3.0 rally is about Malaysia's future - about whether a national leader will lead, about whether the field will be fair enough to be respectable, about whether a government treats its people with a modicum of respect and about whether politics in Malaysia will be a politics of the street or effective dialogue with a reasonable leadership.

Too much of late in Malaysia has been about negativity, anger and insecurity. Bersih 3.0 is moving politics away from that negativity to the promise of a better future for Malaysians, or at least trying to do so. Najib's reaction to Bersih 3.0 is perhaps his most serious leadership test yet.

