

**PM's only recourse is an honourable draw**  
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With the Election Commission (EC) duo as Umno members, the moral high ground is Bersih's, leaving Najib to snatch a draw from the jaws of defeat.

In a confrontation of this nature, it is important to occupy the moral high ground, going into the final stretch.

With the contestants having each shot their bolt and headed for an eyeball-to-eyeball face-off, the only thing that will separate the two is the moral promontory and who gets to occupy it.

Electoral reform advocacy group Bersih, a good 24 hours before their confrontation with the powers-that-be reaches its denouement this afternoon, were gifted with a temporary occupation license for a moral vantage point.

abdul aziz ec pc 060411That ground was ceded to them when it was revealed that the EC chief Abdul Aziz Yusof and deputy Wan Ahmad Wan Omar are members of Umno.

If this doesn't induce laughter, well, I suppose you cannot be blamed too much: 55 years of Umno's occupation of the seat of power has blurred the lines of differentiation between the interests proper to Caesar and the interests that are within the ambit of civil society.

The lines may have melted but they have not disappeared.

The only person now who can snatch a draw for the powers-that-be from what looks like abject defeat in the contest of wills between civil society and the government is Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

It isn't too late for him to announce this morning that he had advised the EC chief and his deputy that their positions are untenable given their membership of Umno.

This would do some good to his chances of emerging from the tight spot into which his administration, in a pattern that is all too recurrent, has stumbled, as much from reflexive habits of thought and reaction as the machinations of its underlings.

NONThe PM can go then go one better on his scorecard by asking the police to allow the Bersih 3.0 demonstrators to stage their sit-down protest at the Dataran.

Not the least of a beleaguered leader's options, when the chips are this badly down, is granting to his opponents what it no longer makes sense to withhold.

The time is not too late for the PM to make concessions before the Bersih crowds gather on the periphery of the Dataran Merdeka, entry to which has been denied them by a court order obtained by the police two days ago.

Government on the rack

This is the only recourse for Najib after it has become increasingly clear that the raft of liberal reforms he pledged to introduce last September has turned out to be counterfeit.

If the crowd that Bersih marshals today is as large, as multiracial and as intergenerational as the one that descended on Kuala Lumpur central on July 9 last year, the government will be placed on the rack for the

second time in less than a year on the issue of polls reform.

The Najib administration has tried to dummy and weave its way around the issue for a year now, after reports of vote buying and accusations of government exploitation of state agencies marred the state polls held in Sarawak in April last year.

The Bersih clamour for polls reform, whose first projection on the national scene was staged on Nov 10, 2007, could not be conjured away, either by police repression or by parliamentary chicanery.

In the first instance, the fact of Bersih's formidability was reflected by the size and crowds that their second demonstration drew on July 9 last year despite the heavy police restrictions.

In the second instance, the parliamentary select committee's pallid attempt at addressing Bersih's core concerns were compounded by the government's railroading through the legislature changes to balloting process that only highlighted the insincerity of its avowals about being for polls reform.

Finally, the disclosure that both the EC chairperson and his deputy are Umno members rendered the whole sorry spectacle a farce.

Now only the PM, who has been portrayed as a leader wanting to reform but is being balked by retrograde elements within his camp, can rescue matters by the bold strokes of decisive leadership.

He can call for the resignation of the dubious EC pair and ask his cousin, the home minister, to prevent the police this afternoon from checking the Bersih crowds' entry into Dataran Merdeka where the nation's progenitor Tunku Abdul Rahman once spelt out what the meaning of independence from colonial rule should mean for Malaysian citizens.

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