

Cops, protesters turn back the clock
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What could have been a shining example of a mass peaceful rally in downtown Kuala Lumpur was sullied by some overzealous protesters and the police returning to their trigger happy ways.

As Bersih 3.0 drew near, the police were obviously out to show that they are changing tact, in line with the Najib administration's pledge to support peaceful protests.

Gone were stern warnings of reprisal, dozens of crippling road blocks throughout the city and arrests of people donning demonstration related paraphernalia.

NONE In fact, the police even ignored about 2,000 people who gathered near Dataran Merdeka around midnight, whereas in the past they would almost likely to have been dispersed forcefully.

The apparent composure among the police was maintained throughout until some protesters breached the police cordon along Jalan Tun Perak at about 3pm.

This was the obvious turning point. Police reacted with scores of arrests and the police fired tear gas and water cannons at the protesters in order to enforce the lockdown on Dataran Merdeka.

But instead of just maintaining the cordon, the police chased protesters along Jalan Tun Perak and Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman about half-a-kilometre in both directions.

First shot fired after call to disperse

Police personnel were seen running after protesters near the Sogo shopping mall and Maju Junction mall while tear gas were fired as far as the Menara Maybank building.

NONE A cat-and-mouse game ensued as small pockets of protesters continued to weave through the many alleyways in an attempt to regroup for more than two hours.

There were also reports of violence near Sogo, resulting in a police car being overturned and a police revolver being stolen which was later recovered.

Over at a market off Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, there were also reports of fisticuffs between protesters and police personnel, while eye witnesses also saw detainees being assaulted.

What was NONE disappointing was that the cordon breach and subsequent reprisal happened just minutes after protesters were urged by Bersih leaders to disperse, at about 3pm.

When Bersih 2.0 co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan urged the crowd to disperse, now that their objectives have been achieved, some within the crowd chanted "Dataran! Dataran!" indicating that they were adamant about occupying Dataran Merdeka.

Losing the moral high ground

Although it is almost certain that the police had used disproportionate and unnecessary force, the actions of a minority have definitely overshadowed what would have been a peaceful and meaningful rally.

For decades, activists and opposition parties have been fighting for the right to assemble peacefully and Bersih 3.0 could have been the example needed to prove the authorities wrong.

NONE For the most part, the rally was orderly and the police put up only token resistance to groups which marched towards Dataran Merdeka.

With the many bloody incidents which broke out over the past few hours, it makes it all too convenient for the authorities to now tighten the screws on the constitutional right to assembly.

Although the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 represents more concessions than proper reforms, they were hard fought for years, only to be undone in a few hours.

But the police has also taken a major hit over the long list of injuries sustained by protestors and must be scrutinised for their heavy handedness.

Had the police limited their action to the cordon, instead of chasing protestors throughout the city, the level of injuries would have been minimum if none at all.

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