

Najib's second and more grievous miscalculation
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COMMENT For the second time in less than a year, the government of Najib Razak is staring at the consequences of a huge miscalculation of the public mood for change.

The misread this time could ratchet up pressure within his own party for the prime minister to do something drastic to pull his chestnuts out of the fire.

Either that or he faces the prospect, in the event of what is likely to be a tepid performance at the general election, of being asked to relinquish the Umno presidency, just as his predecessor was compelled to, even before elections to its top posts are held.

The clock is winding down rapidly to both polls - the one must be held within a year and the other, less inflexible in its timeline, due for staging not much after.

The huge size, multiracial diversity and the relative youth of the crowds that electoral reform pressure group Bersih succeeded in attracting to its protest yesterday is inevitably being read as a harbinger of results to come at the national polls and the Umno one.

Barring of course electoral fraud, concern over which had driven the Bersih protests over the last five years, the BN-led government of Najib is looking at a poor outing at the 13th general election.

After what had happened at the last general election, which was held a few months after the first Bersih protest of Nov 10, 2007, followed by the Hindraf march 15 days later, observers are apt to extrapolate from the magnitude of protest rallies for a sense of what is to come when balloting begins.

Youth outsize presence

Credible estimates put the crowd at last July's Bersih 2.0 at 50,000, and the one yesterday at four times that number.

These estimates are not easily verifiable, but observers recalled a palpable sense of a surging wave emanating from the crowds that showed up at the second Bersih rally.

If last July's protest was a torrent of popular sentiment for polls reform, yesterday's demonstration was geyser-like in size and intensity.

More ominous for the longevity of the ruling Najib-led BN coalition was the presence of large numbers of youth among the protesters.

The young are said to make up 70 percent of the 2.3 million new voters, up from the last election's total of 10.5 million voters in all, on the Election Commission's rolls. This increase is being seen as pivotal to the outcome of the 13th general election.

No doubt the decision of Himpunan Hijau, the protest movement that grew out of opposition to the rare earth plant in Pahang, to make common cause with Bersih had contributed to lowering the average age of participants at yesterday's Bersih protest.

Youth were conspicuous among the impressive crowds that had gathered at the Himpunan Hijau rally held in Kuantan earlier this year to protest the Lynas plant in Gebeng.

Then, their outsize presence suggested that environmental issues weighed with them.

Yesterday, their evident enthusiasm and large prevalence among the crowds indicated that their concerns have since become more holistic.

Inflationary effect

Because crowds at public rallies have become an electoral weather vane, the size of the Bersih rallies of last July and yesterday will be read as indicative of what it to come at the general election.

Probably mindful of that, the Najib administration was anxious to avoid the impression of being extremely forbidding about the Bersih 3.0 event when the advocacy group announced in early April that it intended to stage a protest over the inadequacy, or rather duplicity, of the government's efforts at electoral reform.

By giving permission for the protest to be held but barring it from being held at Bersih's chosen venue - Dataran Merdeka - the government had hoped to take some of the wind out of the reform movement's sails.

However, the public wrangling over the venue between the powers-that-be and Bersih, not to mention recurrent controversies about phantom and illegal voter registrations, fanned the embers of discontent among Bersih's supporters.

Finally, two days before the scheduled protest, the disclosure that the EC chief and his deputy were members of Umno was seen to have irretrievably contradicted the government's avowals of genuine interest in polls reform.

That must have had an inflationary effect on the crowds' determination to support electoral reform. The upshot was yesterday's largest ever gathering in Kuala Lumpur for a political protest in decades.

Najib will now have to push the polls from what was lately bruited to be a date in June to months down the road, or conjure up nostrums to placate the deep veins of discontent that Bersih and the opposition parties have tapped into.

But things may just be too little too late.

