

**The morning after - sympathy and stridency**  
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COMMENT There you have it: Within a day of perhaps the biggest political demonstration ever held in Kuala Lumpur, the three horsemen of the government's early response system have spoken - two opting for sedation and one for stridency.

radzi razak najib 290412Press reports capture Prime Minister Najib Razak, on a sympathy visit to the injured, leaning close to a recovering journalist to whisper a variation of what he must have told Teoh Beng Hock's family when he empathised with them after the tragedy of the young DAP aide's death three years ago.

His cousin, the home minister who possesses a disconcerting ability to mix bizarre logic with bromides, joined in the tranquillising mission.

But Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin stayed true to his right-wing image, taking a strident stance towards all and sundry.

He squarely blamed Ambiga Sreenevasan, the Bersih co-chair, for the violent incidents that marred the tail-end of the demonstration on Saturday, and generally took an expansive view of the responsibility he would otherwise reject if, by extension, it were suggested that the onus for the catastrophic national cattle-breeding project is his because he held the watch at the Agriculture Ministry when the scheme was approved.

Playing the blame game to the hilt

However, it was not just two parts sympathy and one part stridency that summed up the government's initial response.

NONE Saifuddin Abdullah, for some time now almost alone among the Umno leadership cohort in willingness to engage with the issues, could not play the ostrich against the salience of Bersih 3.0.

"BN must be very careful in addressing this," counseled the deputy higher education minister yesterday, obviously unable to avert his gaze from the magnitude of the Bersih crowds.

However, Saifuddin has not been known to take the unconventional thinking he occasionally squirts beyond a certain point.

Though he appears to possess a willingness to engage with issues impliedly raised by the size, racial diversity and relative youth of the throngs at the Bersih 3.0 protest, an innate caution tempers his spirit.

It is a safe bet, then, that the government will play the blame game to the hilt, rounding-in on responsibility for the skirmishes between protesters and police that occurred at the end of last Saturday's protest.

Bersih will be blamed and Ambiga will be made the scapegoat because her stature as a former Bar Council chief and her gender have helped to engender that other striking feature of the Bersih crowds: the high prevalence of women.

Sheer size of the protest

The crowds' multiracial diversity, its youth and its high female composition, not to mention the overall magnitude of the throng, in combination, made the third edition of Bersih's now five-year push for

electoral reform a spectacle on the scale of the packed amphitheater from Roman times.

In other words, Bersih 3.0 was not just an escalation in the physical scale of its predecessors, Bersih 2.0 in July 2011 and Bersih 1.0 in November 2007, it was an agglomeration of the streams of discontent that have been welling up over a long time in the Malaysian body politic.

None faced with the protest public theatre of this scale, a government that tetchily focuses on incidents that were sporadic rather than characteristic of the occasion is one that is out to evade rather than grapple with the underlying issues.

When you configure into the Kuala Lumpur spectacle of Bersih 3.0 the simultaneous organisation of protest gatherings in several cities in the country and in the rest of the world where Malaysians are domiciled, and consider the peaceful conduct of all the protests bar one (and that too at its fag end), it is stupefying to play the blame game over responsibility for the violence of a straggling few.

But that seems the intent of the deputy prime minister who if he persists with the blame card will only transform the public relations disaster for the government that Bersih 2.0 was last July into the catastrophe that Bersih 3.0 has still the potential to be.

A government that only wants to treat with the symptoms of the multiple problems it faces and not with its underlying causes is one that is dangerously exhibiting a sleepwalker's insulation from reality.

It is not a helpful attitude at any time, least of all when an election impends.

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