

Police brutality hurts - but it hurts Umno most

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COMMENT The police violence unleashed on peaceful protesters, journalists, lawyers and medical volunteers at last Saturday's historic and phenomenally successful Bersih 3.0 rally in Kuala Lumpur is a sign that Umno is in growing danger of losing its grip on power.

The worsening police brutality must be seen as a measure of the political elite's increasingly desperate and ineffectual efforts to respond to the prospects of losing power.

Similarly, a spike in state violence against demonstrators was an unavoidable stage in the latter stages of recent regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

NONE In most revolutions, the organs of state violence simply cannot help themselves, and inevitably resort to aggression, when they are unrestrained by their political masters.

This will come as cold comfort to reported victims of police violence, such as Bersih steering committee member Wong Chin Huat, but state violence is often part of the birth pangs of momentous historical and political change.

Violence was planned

The violence at Bersih 3.0 in the capital - significantly absent from 85 other rallies in 35 countries - was evidently planned in advance.

Men in police uniforms removed their numbers and name tags to avoid identification, and carried weapons such as knuckle-dusters.

Many wrapped rags around their faces to avoid identification, in a bizarre role reversal of the traditional 'cops and robbers' imagery.

In contrast, most protesters seemed proud and eager to publicise their participation at the rally, in support of clean and fair elections. Thanks in large part to the two latest Bersih rallies, decades of fear, fuelled by Umno intimidation of dissidents using the ISA and other repressive laws, have now been mostly swept away.

That the KL violence was premeditated was suggested by PKR vice-president N Surendran. He announced he had information that Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein had instructed news editors to suppress news of police brutality - a day before the April 28 rally.

berita harian star new strait times newspaper coverage on bersih 3.0 rally The mainstream media has been predictably obliging to the home minister and to Umno. Astro censored out parts of a BBC report on police action during the rally.

One mainstream newspaper even baldly stated that The Sun journalist Mohd Radzi Abdul Razak had been assaulted by 15 people after he had tried to defend a policeman from being beaten by protesters, although Radzi had clearly told journalists that he had been "kicked in the gut", then beaten by seven or eight policemen. No apology has followed.

Let loose by politicians

It might seem logical that most rank-and-file policemen ought to have dreaded the prospect of being seen

beating up protesters at Saturday's rally.

Their self-confidence and public image have taken a hard knock from widespread condemnation of police brutality at last year's Bersih 2.0 rally, and from the outrage over the killing of innocent 15-year-old Aminulrasyid Amzah and of deaths in police detention.

There have also been demoralising allegations, made by prominent retired policemen such as former Commercial Crimes Investigation Department head Ramli Yusuff, of corruption within the highest ranks of the force.

Still, some policemen appear to have been given free rein at Bersih, and were seen to be brazen enough to beat up peaceful protesters making their way home.

It can be argued that several policemen might have been enraged by false rumours that demonstrators had killed policemen, as one young detainee reported on his Facebook page.

But the organised brutality - exemplified by the queues of policemen doling out verbal and physical abuse to detainees being led, handcuffed, to a holding area - indicated the violence was not an emotional response, but had been orchestrated.

The go-ahead for the clampdown was surely issued by top Umno leaders, given that the premier and home minister are Umno's president and vice-president respectively.

Without this green light, the police could not possibly have beaten demonstrators with such abandon.

Quasi-fascist appeal

Since the racial pogrom of May 13, 1969, Umno's political survival has been predicated on its quasi-fascist appeal to ethnic supremacy.

Bersih 2.0 and 3.0 have effectively demolished Umno's ability to use the terror of ethnic violence to curb dissent.

The multi-ethnic rallies of July 9 last year and last Saturday showed Malay and non-Malay demonstrators sharing camaraderie and mutual support when faced with boots and batons, tear gas and noxious chemicals fired from water cannons.

This 'social bridging', broadcast via the social media, has eroded fears of racial violence among the Internet-savvy young. They have no memories of May 13.

Umno has clearly lost the propaganda battle. The mainstream media's credibility has evaporated, because of doctored photos and seemingly endless lies and contradictions.

Suggestions in the Umno-dominated media that the Bersih protests were instigated by foreign powers, communists, Christian missionaries, militant lesbians and gays - or even some mutant combination of the above - have been globally derided.

Implications for GE13

Umno can no longer rely on the bogeyman of ethnic violence to deliver Malaysian Chinese votes to its BN partners MCA and Gerakan, since non-Malay participants formed a healthy proportion of all the first-hand witnesses to Bersih 2.0 and 3.0.

Misjudged police violence at the Bersih 2.0 and 3.0 rallies has proved devastating for Umno's re-election efforts. Bersih protesters, young and old, have returned to each subsequent rally in ever increasing numbers, and with ever increasing political awareness.

The Bersih 3.0 rallies of 3,000 in Johor, and over 1,500 each in Sarawak and Sabah - all traditional BN strongholds - were peaceful, though several demonstrators in Johor Baru lodged police reports that acid had been splashed over their parked cars.

The shocking KL photos and videos of mass police beatings of protesters curled up on the ground, and the use of tear gas as collective punishment, will now contribute to anti-BN feeling in other states.

One Bersih supporter wrote in to the Global Bersih 3.0 website, exhorting all Malaysians to vote in the 13th general election or GE13.

"I salute all Bersih 3.0 organisers and participants worldwide. Although it is heartening to see the level of support (for) Bersih 3.0, the fact remains that this government will never meet the demands of Bersih 3.0, before GE13 or beyond... if the government can't change, we should change the government."

The police have unwittingly brought Umno's worst fear closer: that voters will punish Umno for its crimes, and its servants', in GE13.

No political party can stay in power forever, even if the cost of tear gas is no object.

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