

Halting the wheels of injustice
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By Josh Hong

In the aftermath of the Bersih 3.0 massive protest last week, one of the pressing questions to ask is: why should Dataran Merdeka have been ordered off-limits in the first place? Malaysians' right to peaceful assembly is unequivocally enshrined in the constitution, and since when has the nation's highest law been superseded by a municipal by-law?

It is beyond doubt that the government and the police are now working in unison to shift the blame onto the participants by playing up the alleged breaching of the barricades. On this, I have only one thing to say: a genuinely democratic government elected by the people through a clean, transparent and fair electoral process will be least likely to be in a haste to perceive its citizens as potential rabble.

NONE By sealing off the Dataran and securing a court order to ban the public from setting foot on it, the mayor and his political masters had done just that.

Najib Abdul Razak's paltry argument that the authorities had to resort to extreme precaution for fear that the crowds would end up occupying the Dataran permanently simply cannot stand up to scrutiny. Had the organisers and the protesters come with this intention, it would not matter whether it was held in Stadium Merdeka or elsewhere.

If the apprentice prime minister had indeed been so wary over a plan as such, why did his cohorts offer several "more suitable" venues? Would it make any difference had the participants been bent on wreaking havoc?

It is precisely because we are an orderly and peaceful lot that we had insisted on the Dataran. It would also present an opportunity for the public to break Umno's monopoly on the discourse of nation-building. My friends in Thailand were amazed that we had only prepared to occupy the historical square for one afternoon and promised to vacate it thereafter, for any public mobilisation on this scale in Bangkok would more often than not last for days, if not weeks.

Najib and his paranoid team should truly be grateful and relieved that Malaysians had served them a notice well in advance and also pledged cooperation. But it was the police - acting with the connivance of a shamelessly cunning government - that once again tarnished Malaysia's image as a friendly country.

Instead of acknowledging its excessively violent reaction and making amends, the police made the utterly ludicrous claim that the officers on duty could not tell journalists apart from perpetrators, effectively implying that it was perfectly justifiable for them to resort to violence. It is as good as saying the police from now on would be given the right to shoot indiscriminately while chasing a robber, and there would be no legal recourse.

NONE I fully understand the Bersih 3.0 committee was duty-bound to ensure public security, especially when the presence of the elderly and other relatively vulnerable groups was expected. The consent not to breach the barricades - reluctant it certainly had been - was therefore arguably acceptable. However, all the indicators point unmistakably to a police conspiracy, in which the crowds were lured into thinking all hurdles were cleared for them to enter the Dataran.

I personally witnessed how Tian Chua, the Batu MP, and several individuals - Malays and Indians - negotiated with the police near Jalan Parlimen, just across the road from the Bandaraya Buildings. Minutes later, the police withdrew and the FRU trucks started to leave. The crowds burst into cheers and began to rush towards the Dataran. Yet my gut feelings were right: it was a trick, and tear gas and water cannon were fired into the crowds from the other end in no time!

Betraying the public trust

This, coupled with the deliberate disruption of mobile phone services which had crippled communication between the organisers and the participants, was no doubt a sinister plan to discredit the entire movement. Quite clearly, the police - by charging into the crowds with a vengeance - have betrayed the public trust while the Najib administration has lost its legitimacy completely.

My heart goes out to all those journalists who had to endure physical harm in order to cover the otherwise joyful and carnival-like event. But my solidarity will only be with those who care earnestly about truth, integrity and justice in a tightly controlled and horribly manipulated media environment in Malaysia.

In other words, I will never wear black for the likes of Zainuddin Maidin, the so-called Tokoh Wartawan Negara but in actual fact a veteran Umno propagandist, Wong Chun Wai, the piper who never fails to play for whoever becomes MCA president, and Tay Tian Yan, a Sin Chew deputy editor-in-chief who lauded unashamedly Najib "the reformist" for pushing "Malaysian democratic progress 10 years, or even 20 years, forward", only to have egg on his face with every policy flip-flop and PR disaster of his idol.

These "media professionals" are nothing but craven lickspittles, and they can keep their datukship (or future datukship) with them, for there is no better testament to their gullibility and servility.

NONE In any case, the biggest protest in Malaysia's history has been an empowering experience for many. I saw people who took pictures right in front of FRU trucks, and would not hesitate to explain to the police why they had to be there when questioned. After decades of subjugation to Umno's fear tactics and paternalistic rule, Malaysians have finally found the courage to rediscover the vital significance of active citizenship.

But the mayhem that followed laid bare the abusive and corrupt nature of the Umno regime, under which much injustice has occurred. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian who sacrificed his own life in order to remind his fellow Germans of Hitler's evil rule, once said that "we are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice; we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

After Bersih 3.0, it is no longer viable for Malaysians to just reach out to those who have been subjected to the abuse of the naked power. It is high time that we jam the spoke of the wicked wheel by removing this immoral government that rules with blatant lies, skulduggery and brute force.