

Road to Malaysia's day of destiny
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COMMENT With well over 100,000 people gathering last week for electoral reform in the largest street protest in the nation's history - and the event marred by violence by both state and non-state actors alike - Malaysian politics has reached an important impasse.

The Bersih 3.0 rally and its aftermath reveal that the path ahead for Malaysian politics will grow even more contentious and complex. As the different 'Bersih stories' pour in, ranging from 'ordinary' heroism to the darker accounts of beatings and abuse of power, the move of Malaysian politics outside of the realm of elite to the streets and social media is both empowering and scary.

Prime Minister Najib Razak's decision not to accommodate the concerns of the protesters last week, and even to demonise their actions, now prods Malaysia further along the road to its day of destiny, where the political fate of Malaysia's 54-year government will be determined. So far, the routes chosen are one of confrontation rather than compromise, making resolution to differences even more difficult.

Before the rally, I argued that four actors would shape politics around Bersih 3.0 - the youth, the middle class, the police and East Malaysians. Of these, three were decisive on rally day itself (the latter will grow more so as elections approach).

The youth and the middle-class attended the rally in large numbers, marking a new generation's engagement with politics and transforming a largely apathetic middle class into a more engaged electorate.

Those wearing yellow and green included Malaysia's soccer moms, the shopping mall princesses, disgruntled students, retirees and usually reticent professionals.

These individuals comprised those who had for years enjoyed the air-conditioned comfort of Malaysia's success, yet with different levels of concern and angst chose to brave Kuala Lumpur's hot and humid conditions on April 28. It was uncomfortable, but overwhelmingly, this embrace of discomfort shows how engaged Malaysians are with hot-button political issues and their willingness to stand up and be counted.

They were there because they see the country moving in the wrong direction and wanted to make it right. At the very least, the Bersih rally revealed the shortcomings of the country's leaders in addressing the concerns of a large, important and increasing number of its citizens.

Much of the attention focused on the third actor, the police, whose over-the-top actions in the use of tear gas and their attacks on journalists have permanently stained their reputation among those connected to the rally.

For those not at the rally, the picture is less clear as the mainstream media has manipulated the event in an attempt to snatch the moral high ground, with the government going as far as

censoring the international media and destroying cameras. Often the characterisation of police action has been one of black and white, where in actual fact there is much more gray, and views are evolving as more and more stories are shared.

Questions will remain about the breaching of the barricade, and unless a truly independent party investigates, the 'he said, she said' dynamic will be rife with conspiracy theories that breed confusion and suspicion rather than promote genuine respect for the rule of law.

Ultimately, Malaysian voters will decide on who ordered what and why, as the truth cannot be censored with over 100,000 Malaysians from all walks of life sharing their experiences back inside their air-conditioned homes through a social network that directly and indirectly touched over half of the electorate.

Different narratives

Bersih 3.0 was a nationalistic event, a moment of patriotism. What is striking to see are two conflicting 'Save Malaysia' narratives that have emerged. The first is one that is shared by rally attendees and its supporters as those who braved the tear gas decided to come out to 'save' the country.

This vision is one in which the event becomes a turning point towards greater freedom and empowerment. The symbolism of Dataran Merdeka runs deep as this nationalist narrative is one of rights and fairness.

The core of electoral reform involves guaranteeing that the voice of the people is heard fairly and freely. As such, for Bersih supporters attending the rally, it was about this democratic image for the country as it hopes to move towards a stronger system based on integrity and inclusion.

This stands in stark contrast to the alternative image based on a more reactionary nationalism, one in which the threat is defined as the protesters, ordinary people, who are challenging the status quo. They were portrayed as attacking the country, first on the police force and then later the incumbent system as a whole.

This government-linked 'image building' has attempted to showcase the protesters as national security threats (needing barbed wire), immoral actors who are 'dirty' rather than clean. Embedded in this narrative is the image that the protestors are anti-Malay, initially as attackers of the Malay police force and later as supposedly immoral individuals.

It is hate-speech that is reminiscent of regimes that feed on fear and hold onto power through exclusion. Also weaved into this narrative is the image of destabilising reformasi proponent fighting for power in the form of Anwar Ibrahim, who is ironically attacked even further in what can be seen as an effort to bring back the Dr Mahathir Mohamad's base of supporters into Najib's political fold.

The efforts to stoke hatred of the Bersih movement and its supporters, especially opposition leaders, are extensive, involving the manipulation of the foreign media and threats against

journalists and observers, such as Australia's Senator Nicholas Xenophon.

This narrative is about using racism and fear, hoping to tap into underlying conservatism and relying heavily on state power to hold onto power. This is all couched in an alternative narrative of patriotism, where Dataran Merdeka is portrayed as the place where challengers to power are putting the country governed by the BN under attack.

For the democratic nationalists in this equation, Bersih 3.0 was a mass rebellion. It was attacked, put down and described in such a manner that will build anger. The calls for Bersih 4.0 are already being voiced among supporters.

For the reactionary nationalists, Bersih 3.0 represents a revolutionary event that they have chosen to demonise, not fully realising that in doing so they are sowing the seeds of further discontent.

Supporters on this pole are demanding for arrests, with Bersih leaders and opposition activists top of the list, as they are blinded by authoritarian tools used in the Mahathir era that are outdated in Malaysia's more mature polity.

Four fundamental mistakes

The reason that these narratives are so different is a continued misreading of Bersih 3.0. There are four fundamental mistakes that the reactionary nationalists made about the Bersih rally. First of all, they continue to equate the movement with the opposition.

This stems from a deep-seated fear of Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim. While both Pakatan Rakyat and the civil society-led Bersih movement share some common interests in reform, as do the overwhelming majority of Malaysians from across the political divide, they are not the same. Bersih represents a broad social movement that goes beyond opposition political leaders, and arguably even the Bersih leaders themselves.

It is about reform in governance and better representation, including on the part of opposition parties. This expansion of civil society into places such as Kota Kinabalu and Ipoh, as well as broadening within Kuala Lumpur itself, illustrates the new people-oriented politics of Malaysia. Elites on both sides will have to accommodate a more active and engaged public.

The days when people blindly follow the leaders or go to the streets for personalities alone are gone. Attacks on individual politicians in the wake of the rally just reveal a complete misunderstanding of the movement.

The second mistake of the reactionary nationalists is that Bersih 3.0 is about separate groups of Malaysians divided by ethnicity, organised by clearly ethnically divided groups. While ethnic identity remains important for Malaysian politics, for rally goers this was not about race, but about the country. The consistent theme is one of Malaysian identity, where one of the rally's theme songs was 'Negeraku'.

The impact of this public move to embrace non-ethnic politics is profound. In March 2008,

voting across ethnic lines was largely private. The reality of common purpose came when the results came out.

Many of the motivations of March 2008 - Hindraf, religious rights and more - were ethnic in nature. Bersih 3.0 was markedly different. It was about a common purpose, where ethnicity was put aside in favour of community building. Bersih 3.0 was arguably the largest trust-building event in Malaysia's history after Merdeka.

Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazans, Ibans and more met each other, shared laughter, water, sweets, salt... and tears. (The spillover is that it helps build trust among many opposition supporters who came to the rally, as well as the middle-ground Malaysians who met die-hard opposition members for the first time. For PAS in particular, perhaps the biggest success was its Amal security units, which were seen protecting rally-goers across races.)

After years of movement towards differences, towards less understanding, this was put aside on a hot afternoon. Bersih 3.0 has set in place conditions where trust building among ordinary people can grow stronger.

Ironically, the reactionary nationalists have underestimated the dissipation of fear in Malaysian politics. This is their third mistake. The bravery among Malaysians is growing. You do not need to look at the numbers of the crowd, although this should not be ignored.

You do not need to even look at the leaders of the movement or the examples of police officers who offered helping hands to rally goers while some of their peers were abusing their positions. Malaysians are increasingly willing to take ownership of their future and are willing to do so again.

Conservatively, the size of Bersih 3.0 doubled in less than a year. The authorities are fooling themselves if they think that these people will not stand up again. Bersih conservatively directly touched over 20 percent of the electorate and indirectly much more. The large participation of young people is especially important as they are traditionally the strongest risk-takers.

One student remarked to me afterwards how the taste of the tear gas the second time was sweeter and she was ready for more. Yes, a she. This is a less fearful Malaysia, and a more angrier one.

Finally, the reactionary nationalists appear to be mistakenly ignoring the issue behind the rally - electoral reform. Polling conducted in late 2011 shows before Bersih 3.0 that only a third of citizens think the electoral process is fair and free - very much in line with the Umno hardcore.

Whatever people think about the tactics and individuals in Bersih - and views differ - the overwhelming majority of Malaysians see a problem with the electoral system.

The government should bear in mind that globally, the single most important event that triggers political transitions is a fraudulent election. If the BN goes to the polls under the circumstances that are already widely seen to be unfair and lacking integrity, they are miscalculating the underlying sentiments of a growing number of people about the core issue of the rally.

They will be seen to be illegitimate by a large share of the population. This size of the rally should be sending clear signals to leaders to properly engage in electoral reform. Anything else will be seen by many as a desperate measure to hold onto power rather than a genuine mandate of a leader.

No compromises, only confrontation

Attention has centred on the timing of the polls. It looks more and more likely that these will occur as early as next month. Najib, over the past week, has embraced a hardline position, with an attempt to unite his base and papering over the divisions within Umno.

The media inundation of a turned-over car and the resultant violence aims to bring the rural base back into the BN fold. To add onto this, the hardline efforts involving personal attacks - with bizarre photos bordering on pornography on the front-page of national newspapers and complete fabrications of speeches - reflects the beginnings of an assault on the opposition and international observers.

These tactics coupled with the embedded advantages in the electoral system and support from East Malaysia appear to form the strategy that is perceived to bring a BN victory, albeit one that will be highly contentious.

To follow the path of confrontation rather than compromise is very risky. First of all, it ignores the elephant in the room associated with elections, the need for the elections to be seen as legitimate.

To date, the government's outreach to Bersih is missing and genuine avenues for electoral reform remain unexplored. While Bersih faces the challenge of illustrating the need for reforms and moving the movement forward, its central message has resonated among many Malaysians. The greater the demonisation and distancing away from Bersih, the harder compromise is possible.

Second, it assumes that Najib can control the actors who are carrying out hardline manoeuvres. Already the Umno-linked *New Straits Times* has been internationally shamed. How many other institutions will have to compromise themselves in this battle for power, in which more authoritarian measures are adopted?

What makes the current environment complex for the current leadership is that even its own actors on the BN side have become more non-state in nature and are increasingly mobilised, making this move toward legitimising hardline approaches even more risky.

Letting this sort of politics rule reflects on the leadership. Physics teaches us that with every action there is another reaction. Hardline options provoke hardline responses. This dynamic will serve to polarise the electorate into political camps and harden positions in these camps. The days of polarisation of families post-1999 reformasi are coming again, but with even greater intensity given the mobilisation of the young.

Finally, this apparent choice by Najib to embrace the hardline political path will make it even

harder to bring about any reform in any realm. To de-link economic reform from political change is unviable. There is a need to implement the rule of law fairly to promote the economy, and this involves a fair and unbiased investigation.

To give in to the hardline political position will undermine economic reform and contribute to the bad practices of using resources to win political allies rather than in building a sustainable and inclusive economy.

Indeed, the miscalculations of a growing social movement by reactionary nationalists will make Najib's national leadership even more vulnerable.

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