

What Bersih 3.0 revealed

MalaysiaKini.com

May 07, 2012

By Lai Tak Ming

The Bersih 3.0 rally is now a few days old and some emotional distance perhaps can be placed to allow for a more objective review.

In the days following, however, more information and photos and videos have surfaced and people have volunteered their own eye-witness accounts or their own personal experience.

There have been accusations and counter accusations. The witch-hunts and the cover-ups have already begun.

The Minister of Home Affairs is talking about charging those caught with various offences while praising the police for their 'professionalism'.

The Bar Council, on the other hand, is talking about taking class action against the police for police brutality.

What inferences can we draw from this rally of seismic proportions? As a participant and after hearing from various eye-witnesses, I would like to personally offer the following observations:

1. There is a huge groundswell of unhappiness - the silent majority is no longer so silent. The fact that it was such a multi-racial crowd suggests that the concerns cuts across the whole spectrum of the society.

There were so many Chinese and this is no longer a Malay based protest, importing people from outside KL. The Bersih movement has become a truly multi-racial, grass-root movement embracing all races and all strata of society.

No one paid these hundreds of thousands of people to come, no one forced them. But they came because they are convinced that enough is enough.

They want free and fair elections where the government is elected by the people, for the people and of the people.

If the government doesn't recognise this, then they are either very blind or very authoritarian and arrogant.

The people no longer feel afraid to speak up.

If there is a free and fair election, there is every possibility that the government may lose.

But will there be one?

2. The police definitely over-compensated, to put it mildly. Someone in an article in *Malaysiakini* even call it police riot. The real rioters with power in their hands were the police.

There appears to be three strategies the police may adopt:

- Dispersal: To get people to disperse and ensure that avenues for dispersal are available.
- Arrest: To ensure those who conduct mischief are apprehended in a professional manner.
- Punitive: To deliberately hurt in such a manner that it would put fear in the victim.

But it appeared that they were punitive in their approach.

They were not satisfied with dispersal. If so they shouldn't have corralled people and prevented them from escaping or leaving.

Why were they firing tear gas from all directions instead of pushing people away from the square? Why were the LRT stations closed? The strategy was really to arrest and to punish.

There were many examples, videos showing police behaving unprofessionally, even being brutal in their treatment of the unarmed protesters.

How can they justify this? The police's responsibility is to protect and ensure the well-being of the people.

What they did was the opposite. Why all the anger at the protesters who were peaceful up till that point?

Even if some people did breach the barricade, need they response with such punitive force? Surely they could have just pushed them back or warn those who came through the breach?

Did the police consider the fact that the crowd was backed up all the way to the end of Jalan Tun Perak and that even tear-gassing the people at the junction of Jalan Tun Perak would not have helped as the people has no place to go?

The police cannot use "being provoked to anger" as their excuse as they have been trained to handle specifically such situations.

Will the government objectively review this and take to task those who are guilty? Or will they cover up? Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein is already true to form.

3. To suggest that this was pre-planned and engineered, that the opposition politicians incited this or that those who fought back were the hardcore, may be over the top.

I think the majority were ordinary people who could not tolerate anymore what they saw as police brutality against its own people.

If it's premeditated, they would have had weapons and other defensive and offensive items, but

none were found.

All the people had to fight with were plastic water bottles. So they were lambs to the slaughter.

The police were well armed and well protected and the people had nothing and nowhere to go.

Why would they want to provoke an incident?

The conspiracy theory seemed more likely to boomerang back to the government.

Was there a covert plan to provoke an incident to discredit the Bersih movement? Why in the first place was Dataran Merdeka deemed unsuitable when it has been used for various social events?

Was City Hall acting under instruction to set the scene for a confrontation? Why did the police take out an ex-parte judgment to declare the area off-limit?

Didn't Hisham declare that Bersih was not a security threat? So on what basis was such a judgment made and without room for rebuttal by the other side, i.e. Bersih?

So because of this decision to not allow ordinary citizens to come for a sit-in carnival at the Dataran, the authorities forced these nice people to walk the streets and cause traffic jams etc.

So it seems the authorities were either not very smart or they did it deliberately to provoke an incident.

3. The few videos and photos that pro-government press and media has been showing again and again of 'rioting' were edited and did not tell the real story of what happened before the incident and what incited the people.

By and large there was minimal damage to property by the protesters.

The only collateral damage appears to be the police vehicle and some DBKL barricades.

The anger was clearly directed only against the police as a direct result of the treatment they meted out.

There is a limit to patience and respect and when you witness fellow citizens, unarmed and without protection, being beaten to a pulp or being run over by a police car, the reaction is understandable though not proper.

If they really wanted to riot, the few thousand police would not have been able to contain the tens of thousands of protesters.

KL would have been burning!! Quite unlike the London riots, this did not happen. So let's not continue to paint the victims as villains.

How can the IGP call the protesters rioters? When would the media stop exercising self-censorship and start reporting in a fair and transparent manner?

That Astro should even go to the extent to censor and edit BBC and Al Jazeera's programs is an indictment of the state of affairs of our media.

So even there is no more need for annual renewal of their KDN license, the mindset of media editors remained entrenched and myopic.

Hopefully the independent panel to be set up would be truly independent.

Thankfully, Suhakam and the Bar Council have already come forward.

4. My final point - the unhappiness is now translating to anger. There is certainly more anger this time round than Bersih 2.0.

People are more defiant and they were not afraid to challenge the police.

There was even a sense that to be arrested was akin to wearing a badge of honour.

The anger is real. There is a real sense of deprivation, feeling that this government is not listening and not caring. People no longer believe. The attitude of the EC has not been helpful to say to least.

The recent changes in the Election Offences Act didn't seem at all to enhance transparency.

Their lack of integrity in answering questions from the international fact-finding team was disingenuous.

If the government does not recognise this anger, it may well boil over to a full scale reaction if people become desperate enough and can no longer believe that the ballot and negotiation are workable alternatives.

I hope and pray that the government would be humble enough to recognise this and to do all that it can to allow for genuine reforms.

Najib has a much better chance of winning if he seriously pursues reforms and if he pledge to ensure free and fair elections.

Winning fairly legitimises the government and gives it the moral authority to rule. Winning unfairly will lead to further unrest.