

How to create rally fatigue

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By Keruah Usit

ANTIDOTE Popular, multi-ethnic opposition to rigged elections has snowballed in the last year, in a way that has surprised perhaps even the Bersih 2.0 and 3.0 rally organisers themselves.

Malaysia's sleazy electoral process is personified by the bedraggled Umno supporters in the Election Commission.

Umno may prefer to keep its dirty linen from the eyes of the public, but ordinary Malaysians are dragging it out into the street.

Even so, will 'rally fatigue' set in, after three mammoth street protests - 50,000 at Bersih 2.0, 15,000 at Stop Lynas and over 100,000 at Bersih 3.0 - in 10 hectic months?

Fatigue looks unlikely. Bersih has grown in numbers, while Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has fizzled out in the US for two main reasons.

Firstly, Bersih has clear demands for electoral reform. Secondly, the movement has a compact leadership, able to mount cogent arguments.

The American protests of OWS gradually lost their focus, thanks to participation by protesters with a multitude of political causes, but no unifying leadership.

OWS could not emulate the Arab Spring. The main driving forces in the Arab revolutions were rising food prices, and incandescent anger among the common people at the greed and barbarity of the richest 1 percent.

The OWS demonstrators in the US could not stay on the streets, because most Americans can afford their bread, and furthermore, class warfare is widely considered a little embarrassing and passé.

Bersih has not tapped into the deep groundwater of class conflict in Malaysia, but a large number of supporters say they have protested as much against dwindling real incomes, caused by corrupt, shameless leaders, as against dirty elections.

Widening disparities, particularly between rich and poor Malays, will continue to drive Malaysians' protests forward.

Bersih's demands for freedom of choice, and the possibility of change at the ballot box, are echoes of calls for meaningful reforms in politics and the economy, both kept in a chokehold by Umno's plutocrats.

Reforms in both arenas are certainly lagging behind social change. This shift in our society is

exemplified by Malays, Chinese and 'others' marching together and protecting one another from tear gas and police brutality.

Social change is fuelled by the Internet, including shared messages on Facebook and Twitter, and by blogs like the *New Straight Times Malaysia* (a witty, diametric opposite of the disgraced mainstream media).

Stemming the tide

So how can Umno stem this tide of discontent, and induce 'rally fatigue'? Can Umno churn out enough propaganda and pseudo-reforms to convince the 'Malaysian street' that it deserves to remain in power?

Premier Najib Abdul Razak, or his well-paid and tarty public relations consultants, seem to have convinced the *Economist*, for one.

Despite having read reports of fellow journalists' arrests, bruised ribs, cracked lenses - and of one journalist literally silenced by his jaws wired shut - the blasé *Economist* reporter hemmed and hawed and finally declared 'Najib emerges from this year's fracas with his reformist credentials essentially intact, not much worse for the wear'.

The article failed to offer the bare minimum of an eyewitness description of the rally.

But Najib is most certainly the worse for wear, and his hysterical attacks on Bersih leaders only highlights his discomfiture.

Still, there is a way for Najib to end Bersih street rallies, if you can imagine yourself in his place.

He would have to advise the Agong to replace the Election Commission with independent professionals, and to implement Bersih's long overdue, eight-point electoral reform plan.

To cement his position as Malaysia's most visionary premier to date, he would then reject Lynas. He would bin the ISA substitute, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill, the Peaceful Assembly Bill, and other repressive laws concerning the press and students.

He would expedite an Independent Commission for Police Complaints and Misconduct, an Anti-Corruption Commission under the aegis of Parliament, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission into the ethnic violence of May 13, 1969.

He would scrap racial discrimination entrenched under the NEP and its replacements, enforce a fair minimum wage immediately, instead of making vacuous promises, provide greater autonomy to Sarawak and Sabah, and 20 percent oil royalties instead of the current 5 percent, and prosecute corrupt politicians and their families in these states.

But in so doing, his party Umno would tear itself apart, and he would lose his party presidency, and most likely end up in jail.

There are many parallels to be drawn between Najib's various 'running-to-stand-still'

transformation plans with those of other hapless *bangsawan*.

The stupidly inert Louis XVI was tinkering with his so-called modernisation policies, even up to the day the Bastille fell in 1789. Over the past year, president Bashar al-Assad has trumpeted inconsequential self-proclaimed reforms in Syria, while relying on untrammelled state violence to stay in power.

In short, Najib will not implement meaningful reforms, because the party elite are trapped in their network of wealth and privilege. They simply cannot help themselves.

On the other hand, experience has shown that those who have attended one rally are more likely to attend others. We may expect Bersih rallies to grow ever larger, given that Umno simply cannot clean up the electoral process.

Eight days after police violence at Bersih 3.0, and mainstream media propaganda of 'Bersih riots' over 1,000 people demonstrated against the demolition of property in Jalan Sultan, Kuala Lumpur. Najib had promised last month to preserve this architectural heritage.

There are no signs of 'rally fatigue'. The fear of our quasi-police state is fading fast.

If Umno loses power, as it eventually must, students of history will look back and note that the Bersih rallies have been a crucial catalyst in ongoing political reform.

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