

## **Learning from the highs and lows of Bersih 3.0**

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On 28 April 2012, the government failed, PKR failed and we failed. But it was so necessary and well worth it.

It was an orchestrated deployment of tear gas and chemical-laced water aimed directly at thousands of Malaysian citizens.

It was a reckless, excessive, even grotesque use of police force. Some Bersih 3.0 participants have gone further to consider what transpired that day as the government's knee-jerk reaction towards an obvious and serious threat to the coalition government's rule.

In similar rhetoric, many exclaim that the excessive use of force was precipitated by the fear that the Bersih movement, undoubtedly made up of Malaysians who are frustrated with the present government's performance, would gain so much momentum and influence, consequently affecting the ruling coalition party's popularity among the people.

Some even say the heavy-handedness and blatant use of physical violence on Bersih supporters was an act of aggression, aimed to send a clear threat to Malaysians:

Participate in Bersih or any movement that questions the prerogative of the ruling government, and you will be severely beaten.

These were the sentiments following the Bersih 3.0 gathering on 28 April 2012.

No doubt, there has been a gross disregard by the government to acknowledge and embrace the unalienable rights of free speech and public assembly.

Beyond that, there has been an abhorrent disregard to human rights, but for a government that has been in power for over 50 years, yet never having to face issues relating to fundamental liberties in the context and at the scale they are being advocated now, perhaps the accusations of the government having such malicious motives might be considered a little extreme.

Quite simply, the government is just inexperienced when it comes to dealing with protests against their authority at this magnitude.

For five decades, this government never had to deal with such objections, never mind at the scale and relentlessness of the present discontentment.

Given the novelty of such circumstances, there would invariably be poor judgment and imprudence in responding to such immense protest and frustration.

The present government might simply be finding it hard pressed to respond in a mature and tactful manner.

Many Malaysians might say they ought to have learned to respond intelligently given there were two previous Bersih rallies, but the number of participants on 28 April 2012 was an unprecedented figure and these rallies were carried out consecutively over a relatively short span of 3 years.

#### Complex issues

The discontentment has grown so rapidly over the last three years. The relentless accusations by Malaysians on complex issues that attack the very core of the government can be considered new and the ruling coalition is only beginning to learn how to react appropriately.

Barricading and tear gassing your own citizens, sending police officers to hunt down and beat up yellow-shirted people like a pack of wolves is no excuse or justification for any government to react to these novel protests - but for an inexperienced, visibly rattled, conservative, immature and aging government, this might be the only way they know how to respond to such damaging accusations made by such a large number of Malaysians.

Despite their confrontational reactions, the ruling coalition still remains in control, so they may consider there is little need to change their approach at present and until they lose this control for at least once in Malaysia's history, they may never learn.

Similarly the police force and FRU are equally inexperienced when it came to dealing with the possibility of 250,000 protestors storming into Dataran Merdeka, an area they were specifically instructed to protect.

There would invariably be disarray in dealing with such a novel and unprecedented situation.

PKR's opportunistic motive to use the Bersih movement as a platform to further their own political interests is questionable, but given that this was a party that been publicly humiliated by the ruling coalition for the past 15 years, the imagery of leading thousands of their supporters into the Dataran Merdeka in defiance of the present government who had gone lengths to shame their leader, is an opportunity which the party felt compelled to capitalise on.

Just like the government's reaction to the Bersih supporters, this foolishness is also a result of inexperience.

Never before had PKR been given such a glorious opportunity.

This year there was an estimated 250,000 protestors, standing shoulder-to-shoulder over a radius of about 10km in the city centre.

This was much more than what the Bersih organisers had to manage during the previous gatherings.

Given the inordinately large number present, the absence of designated group leaders as communication points between groups would inadvertently lead to disorganisation, or potential mayhem.

Many participants of the 28 April gathering complained that they could not hear anything as far as instructions or speeches were concerned, and their decisions to move were made based just on what they saw around them.

In these circumstances, if anyone had walked through the barricade, Bersih attendees would have just followed regardless of whether they had an intention to occupy Dataran Merdeka or not.

If there is no clear protocol on who is allowed to speak and address the crowd or precisely what is allowed to be said, this would cause problems as well.

But this was only the third rally for the Bersih organisers and in Malaysia's entire 50-year history there have only been a handful of protests, none of them at this magnitude.

The Bersih organisers should be proud of what they have achieved with regards to organisation and preparation over the last three years.

They have displayed tremendous foresight and exercised sound judgment.

However, the same organisers must concede that given the burgeoning number of supporters, the lack of effective communication equipment and a clear, comprehensive protocol, problems would invariably arise.

In this regard improvements still need to be made. It follows that the inability to prevent people from breaching the Dataran Merdeka cordon, or to disperse the crowd effectively on 28 April must also be attributed to the organisers' inexperience in handling such a massive crowd.

28 April 2012 unfolded the way it did because of everyone's relative inexperience. The resulting finger-pointing and accusations over the last week has been entertaining, but more importantly, extremely healthy for this country.

The imperative thing is whether those accused will accept criticism constructively and learn from it.

The ruling coalition must learn from this new experience to improve on their policies and reactions towards peoples' demands for transparency and accountability.

They must learn to understand and embrace the concepts of human rights, real unrestrained democracy, accountability, independent powers and transparency, in order to manage the expectations of both the rising educated middle and rural class.

Improvements in this regard are integral to garnering the respect of Malaysians as well as foreigners, especially when Malaysia's international bilateral trade relationships are so important to the prosperity and modernisation of the nation.

The government needs to learn that they cannot just place a cell phone signal jammer right in front of their people, and hope it would be ignored and that if they deliberately censor videos that are being broadcasted all over the world, people will notice it and embarrass the government in return.

This aging and decaying government must learn not to provide nonsensical monosyllabic responses to enquiries from the public and most importantly learn that they simply cannot get away with anything.

The government may take refuge on the assumption that only 250,000 people participated in the 28 April 2012 rally and this represented less than one percent of the 28 million Malaysians.

But for every Malaysian who felt the excruciating pain of tear gas or the cuts and bruises from the fists of a policeman, or even those that just had to watch helplessly as gangs of policemen brutally assaulted a Malaysian, those are votes that the ruling coalition will never have and will probably never get back.

For the 98 percent who were not there, they may still be afraid to speak against such shameful acts openly but you can tell, from their eyes and in their hearts, they know what the government did on 28 April 2012 was wrong and completely disgraceful.

The government can manipulate what the media says or even the internet if they choose to, but they can never stop people from talking to each other.

If this education can only be affected if the coalition party forgoes ruling this country for the next term or thereafter, that is a sacrifice worth making, in the best interest of the people of Malaysia and for the coalition party itself.

The time out will be a tremendous opportunity for the coalition party to get their house in order and come back stronger or at the very least, a little wiser the next time around.

Riot control

The Police and FRU need to embrace the concept that they will no longer be perceived as government hound dogs capable only of taking RM2 bribes for traffic offences - rather they are an armed force supported by the pillars of honour, integrity, discipline and sacrifice with the only purpose of protecting the people and having accountability only towards the people.

They need to develop modern, effective riot control tactics of an international standard that are designed to disperse the crowd and prevent injuries, such as the tactical use of dynamic front and rear defensive echelons with strategically placed arrest teams while maintaining an unbiased attitude.

They need to learn that it is not acceptable to shoot tear gas canisters directly at someone's neck, and that non-lethal weapons should only be used as a last resort, provided there is a clear escape route for the protestors.

However, before these tactics can be practised, every police officer must be ingrained with the fundamental concept that the people are not their enemy. Instead, they must come to realise that the people have been entrusted to them, for them to protect and serve.

Bersih organisers need to realise that their influence on the Malaysian nation is greater than they had ever expected. The movement is spreading at an unprecedented scale.

Depending on what transpires over the next few years, Bersih's influence could be enshrined in Malaysian history books.

Given the extent of their influence, would it be too much trouble to get a louder loudspeakers during the next rally, so everyone can hear exactly what the leaders are saying? "Buka Pagar" and "Balik Rumah" when said quickly, sound dangerously alike.

As for the rest of us, we must realise that our free Milo towels will not defend us from tear gas.

**PS:** In 1968, the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Illinois, was the site of some of the most brutal acts committed by US police against their own citizens.

More than 10,000 anti-war protesters showed up for the convention. The Chicago police saw the protesters as the enemy.

Protestors, reporters, bystanders and anyone who voiced opposition to their tactics were beaten, gassed and then dragged off to be arrested.

Even Red Cross medics who were trying to aid the wounded were beaten by the police. That was 44 years ago in the United States of America.

If 44 years from today, the Malaysian police are still kicking people in the testicles, then it can be said that Malaysia has not made much progress, but at present, Malaysia seems to be doing just fine.

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