

## **Pakatan takes a stab at Umno's 'Merdeka' legacy**

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Fifty-six years ago, Umno was etched into the history books as the party which helped free Malaysia from British colonialists, a feat which it has hitherto never stopped reminding Malaysians about.

The declaration of Independence was made by Umno's second president Tunku Abdul Rahman at Stadium Merdeka, which grew even more famous over the years by playing host to premier entertainment, sporting and national events.

Today, the ageing stadium hosted yet another historical milestone. It was the site of the biggest ever rally organised by opposition parties, which no doubt helped set a new record for the 30,000 capacity stadium.

If it wasn't enough to stage a massive anti-Umno and anti-BN rally at the venue which played a major role in Umno's legacy, PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim capped off the event by chanting "Merdeka" seven times, mimicking Tunku not only in frequency but in mannerism as well.

"Like how our forefathers cried out (Merdeka!), today we repeat that oath and this time, we will achieve genuine independence for the people," he said.

To stress this point further, each time Anwar said "Merdeka", the crowd responded emphatically with "Rakyat".

How will Umno react?

Pakatan Rakyat's antics in Stadium Merdeka is unlikely to bode well for Umno diehards, who are likely to question the sudden and unexpected liberal approach.

Until today, any major rally with a hint of anti-Umno and anti-BN sentiments would have faced the full brunt of the law, with tear gas, batons and water cannons to boot.

Instead, the federal government went out of its way to make sure that the rally proceeded without incident, to the extent of having the police say that their aim was to have "zero casualties" during the event.

In essence, Pakatan came out looking like its support base is growing, despite the intensifying negative press about them coming from the government-controlled media organisations since the last general election.

Such media organisations are going to be hard-pressed to claim that 100,000 people were

paid to attend the rally, whereas Pakatan supporters will claim they braved the heat and congestion, unlike BN's less organic approach in drawing a crowd.

Looking beyond race

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's predecessors have never faced an opposition show of force on this scale before and his party will face a challenge to explain why opposition rally numbers are on the rise under his watch.

During the rally, Anwar, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang and DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng offered their theories, but it was mostly centred around BN's race-based policies.

"We need to break from Umno and BN's sentiments that only Malays can take care of Malays, only Chinese can take care of Chinese, only Indians and can care of Indians, only Ibans can take care of Ibans, and only Dayaks can take care of Dayaks.

"We want to prove we can take care of everyone regardless of race," declared Lim.

Abdul Hadi also sought to reassure Malay supporters that despite the new politics being advocated, the fundamentals of the country will remain unchanged.

"PAS together with PKR and DAP have settled on the principles of constitutional monarchy, Islam as the national religion, Malay as the national language and that bumiputera rights would be defended," he said.

Najib scores own goal?

Pakatan's message was best reflected in Anwar's call to give the opposition coalition's formula a shot.

"Give us a chance because we are sensitive to the people's voice, we are not deaf like BN," he said.

Perhaps it was this "deafness" which may have also contributed to the rise of civil society movements - such as the oil royalty campaign, Himpunan Hijau movement and the Pengerang anti-oil refinery movement - whose supporters made up a significant portion of the participants at the rally today.

These groups have been growing in strength over the past four years after their pleas to the federal government fell on deaf ears.

Save for the Bersih coalition, representatives from every civil society movement that took to the stage explicitly urged Malaysians to bring in a new federal government.

The Najib administration may have avoided a crackdown to prevent a backlash such as in past rallies, but he is now faced with a new challenge of an emboldened Pakatan projecting

its strength on Umno's sacred turf.

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