

**Rent-a-crowd phenomenon hits the big time**  
**Malaysiakini.com**  
**Disember 2, 2010**

COMMENT It has happened often enough now the phenomenon can no longer be dismissed out of hand: assemblies staged on cue, several of whose members, it's suspected, have been hired for walk-on parts designed to show a watching public that the demo-stagers enjoy broader support than their actual numbers imply.

Sunday's anticipated demonstrations by the 'red shirts' (for the Selangor state government) and the 'black shirts' (against the Selangor government) in favour of their respective gripes that is planned to take them from their assembly point at mosques in the city to the Istana Negara (no less!) will put this phenomenon under the neon.

Assemblies of their touted size - 1,000 on the one hand and 2,000 on the other - in striking shirts and headbands emblazoned with slogans, projecting diametrically and combatively opposed views, are usually cause for concern because of what may happen when agent provocateurs decide to take things in hand.

penang attack on anti isa forum 211110 penang umno youth chief norman in blue shirt  
Individuals can be trusted to restrain themselves but not crowds. Try shouting "Fire" in a crowded theatre and see if you can prevent a rush for the exits.

This was the basis of a seminal opinion by the great American jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who held that free speech provisions in the US constitution did not protect someone crying "Fire" in a crowded theatre even if the crier were motivated to call attention to the house's inadequate fire fighting equipment.

A maturing democracy must allow for symbolic speech - which is what you can call the demonstrations planned for Sunday.

It is protected under the Federal Constitution under its freedom of speech stipulations though our police don't seem to know that.

The police require 'symbolic speakers' to apply for a permit before they are allowed to project their freedom to speak.

That arbitrary requirement ought to be struck down and would likely be in the next Parliament, which many observers not only predict will be elected by March or April, but also that it will mark a decisive turn in the future of our country.

Demos artificially enhanced

Citizens aggrieved by some issue must have the right to project their grievances for a noticing public that will then appraise their plight and form an opinion.

These opinions ultimately engender policy that is harnessed to a programme to achieve some good.

However, if demonstrations are artificially enhanced by the hiring of paid hands, it will distort the democratic process.

In recent demonstrations in Penang and Selangor, the hired hands could be seen loitering around the fringes – mainly middle aged men and women and, in some instances, teenage children looking listless.

penang attack on anti isa forum 211110 umno youth On inquiry they let on that they were asked to turn up at the instructions of someone they know who has promised to give them a few score ringgit for the trouble they take to show up.

Cash strapped, they show up at some pre-arranged place where they are given on-the-spot instructions, including the donning of T-shirts emblazoned with slogans and on how to hold banners targeting public figures who are supposed to be embarrassed by the demonstration.

They then proceed to the venue where the demonstration is staged, involuntary actors in a drama whose significance they barely know and about which they care even less.

But whereas the demos in Penang and Selangor were small, barely garnering more than 100 people in each case, indications are the ones planned for this Sunday in the federal capital will be comparatively large.

But how much of the size would be the result of a spontaneous outpouring and how much the consequence of greased palms would be as important as the issues each gathering aims to espouse?

TERENCE NETTO has been a journalist for close on four decades. He likes the occupation because it puts him in contact with the eminent without being under the necessity to admire them. It is the ideal occupation for a temperament that finds power fascinating and its exercise abhorrent.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.  
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/149766>