

Dataran Merdeka Is Not Tahrir Square
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The Prime Minister's recent statement that Bersih supporters intended to occupy Dataran Merdeka and stay there for days with the objective of overthrowing his government must be answered.

Two broad groups made up Bersih's massive crowd in Kuala Lumpur on 28 April 2012.

First, genuine Bersih supporters who were calling for clean elections.

The second group comprised those who support the Pakatan coalition. No doubt, thousands of marchers did not belong to either faction (while some straddled both), but this broad division is not inaccurate.

The Bersih supporters just cannot understand how any political party would oppose clean elections. For them, Barisan Nasional's vigorous opposition, coupled with police brutality that day, indicates that Barisan Nasional has a vested interest in the "status quo", that it will benefit from the present set-up, with substantial help from the Elections Commission. For this group, the Barisan Nasional's conduct will be punished at the ballot box.

For Pakatan supporters, the decision was already made. They are partisan, just as Umno supporters are partisan. Nothing that could have occurred on 28 April would change their vote.

But in each case, change is only going to come at the ballot box, when general elections are held. The only way of changing governments in Malaysia is by the vote. No other method will be countenanced by the people; no other mode has been advocated by any political party. In fact, the surest way for any party or politician to lose support is to propose extra-legal methods of changing the government. Change must be constitutional and lawful.

Accordingly, no one went for the Bersih 'sit-in' or 'walk-in' in Kuala Lumpur on 28 April with the intention of staying overnight, whether on the Dataran or anywhere else in the city. In the course of walking miles through numerous streets for five hours observing thousands of fellow marchers, I did not see a single person equipped for a long stay, like bringing tents, sleeping bags, blankets and towels. Indeed, the Malaysian obsession with food and drinks was such that restaurants enjoyed roaring business that evening. That was the primary objective of those who marched!! Having regard to this food-mania of our people, how would they have coped for days and nights in an 'Occupy Dataran' campaign?

It is an open secret that the hawks and hard-liners advising the Prime Minister always frighten him with the spectre of Tahrir Square. But there is no parallel with Egypt, or for that matter Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain and Syria where the Arab Spring flowered. But even in these countries, it never advanced to the Arab Summer! Reform has halted, and the old power structures are very much in place.

By comparison, Malaysia is far more advanced politically and economically. Ours is a more mature society. The average Malaysian enjoys far more democratic rights and space than citizens in these nations. In some of these countries, unemployment is as high as 25 per cent. In Malaysia, not only do we have full employment, we also provide work for some 3 to 4 million immigrants. Malaysia is a blessed land.

At the other end of the spectrum, Malaysia is also different from the United States. The conditions are not

ripe for an 'Occupy Wall Street' movement. Malaysians are generally conservative, cautious, resistant to change, and absolutely peaceful, abhorring violence. We are too spoilt to endure the inconvenience and hardship associated with any 'occupy' movement.

Accordingly, we who marched, were exercising our democratic rights of expression and assembly. For that purpose, we did not have to sleep overnight in the city. There is absolutely no intention to overthrow the Barisan Nasional government by crude methods. Rather, if a clear majority of Malaysians vote against them (and, that is, translated into seats) at the forthcoming general elections, Barisan Nasional will be dispatched to the opposition benches. But not by any other means. - Aliran

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