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# Just too many 'democrats'

**J**UST before the turn of the century, when Indonesia, or rather Jakarta, was going through the heady days of liberalisation and democratic reforms, street demonstrations were the staple diet in the overpopulated capital.

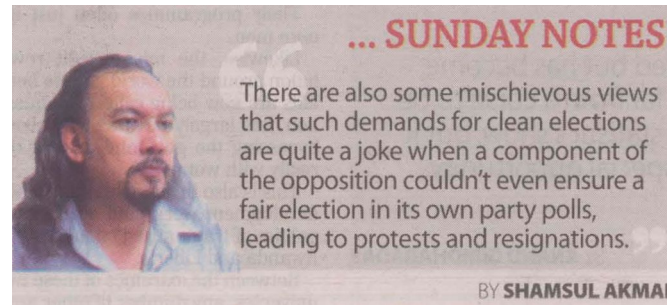
If these demonstrations that started in 1998 were aimed at bringing down Indonesian strongman President Suharto, and successfully so, the subsequent ones were for a motley of reasons.

Despite what was hailed as the first free and fair election in 1999, the street demonstration fever continued to sweep across Jakarta's 20 million population and until 2001, the protests did not cease. They instead threatened to be a potent tool in influencing the nation's decision-making process.

Ironically, if in 1998 the street demonstrations were responsible for Suharto's fall from grace, in 2001, it was to be used to defend disgraced President Abdurrahman Wahid, better known as Gus Dur, who had been impeached.

His supporters from East Java converged on Jakarta by the busloads and in the thousands, promising to defend Gus Dur to remain as the president and threatened to turn the streets of Jakarta red (with blood) if he was removed.

The security forces stepped in and stopped the demonstrations from be-



ing carried out. Gus Dur gave up without a whimper and his supporters returned to their villages almost unnoticed.

During that period, there was also one "interesting" street demonstration organised by some of the Jakarta residents which underscored, if not mocked, the other protests — a demonstration to oppose street demonstrations.

While some described it as being held out of sheer frustration by some segments of the Jakarta population tired that their daily life was being disrupted by the demonstrations, the cynics felt it was done merely because some had run out of ideas over what they should demonstrate for.

Back in Malaysia, or rather Kuala Lumpur, while street demonstrations were a common feature in 1998

when some Malaysians inhaled the *reformasi* movement from Indonesia, the end result was somewhat different.

The leadership did not fall and the 1999 general election re-affirmed the support of the majority for the existing government.

Post 1999, street demonstrations lost their appeal in Kuala Lumpur and, in fact, to a certain degree were abhorred as being disruptive and a bane to the business community.

But it started to make its rounds again a few years ago, before the 2008 general election. There was the first Bersih protest in 2007 and then there was the Hindraf (the outlawed Hindu extremist group) protest.

Both were considered very defining in determining the outcome of the 2008 general election.

Given that the second Bersih rally planned for July 9 is strongly driven by opposition politicians and political parties, it is obvious that they are hoping for political gains in the next general election like that in 2008.

No doubt the stated motive for the demonstration is to demand for a clean and fair general election from the Election Commission (EC).

But such demands, after the opposition made major inroads in the last general election, winning five states and denying the Barisan Nasional its two-thirds majority in Parliament, have given rise to suspicions that they are political in nature.

In other words, the election will only be deemed to be free and fair when the opposition takes over the nation's rule.

Then, there are also some mischievous views that such demands for clean elections are quite a joke when a component of the opposition couldn't even ensure a fair election in its own party polls, leading to protests and resignations.

Another opinion that challenges the altruism of the planned Bersih demonstration is that if the opposition truly believes that the EC is partial and would not conduct a free and fair election — meaning that there is no way the opposition can win — the opposition should then just boycott the general election.

The opposition would then be mak-

ing a very strong point.

However, there's no way the opposition is going to boycott the general election, despite the accusations against the EC, because the opposition knows it always has a chance of taking over Putrajaya, something it has been perpetuating among its supporters.

But this Bersih rally is developing into something bigger than the first.

Umno Youth, probably finally discovering its gumption, has declared that it will hold its own march on the same day.

Perkasa, the Malay-based non-governmental organisation, and several other like-minded groups have also announced their plans to march on the same day as Bersih, promising to flood the capital with their members.

That being the case, the possibility of a collision course between Umno Youth/Perkasa and Bersih is always there.

Since everyone is promising to be bolstered by the numbers, the capital looks set to be overflowing with "democrats", as everyone now is claiming that it is their democratic right to march.

Come July 9, those in Kuala Lumpur must brace for the possibility of getting high on freedom-laced air.

But with that many vanguards of democracy in town, it may just be too much, way too much.