

## Malaysia's Najib must abandon the Mubarak model

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By Simon Tisdall / The Guardian

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**REPRINT** It is not in the same league as Arab spring uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere. But Malaysia's fancifully named "hibiscus revolution" has potential, at least, to inflict a winter of discontent on the gormless government of prime minister Najib Razak. That's something David Cameron should bear in mind when Najib comes touting for business in Downing Street on Thursday. Bilateral trade and investment is important. Respect for basic human rights more so.

Najib reacted with characteristic heavy-handedness when tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur at the weekend demanding "reformasi" – democratic reform – and an end to a defective electoral system that guarantees Najib's party representing the Malay majority, Umno, stays in power indefinitely. About 1,700 people were arrested and many injured as police used baton charges, watercannon and teargas to break up peaceful protests.

In an echo of Britain's Ian Tomlinson affair, one protester, identified as Baharuddin Ahmad, 59, collapsed and later died near the Petronas Towers in central Kuala Lumpur while fleeing teargas. Amnesty International said police had beaten many demonstrators. It demanded an investigation into claims they failed to provide prompt assistance to Baharuddin and that there was a 90-minute delay before an ambulance arrived.

"Prime minister Najib's government rode roughshod over thousands of Malaysians exercising their right to peaceful protest," Amnesty said. "This violent repression ... flies in the face of international human rights standards and cannot be allowed to continue. David Cameron should tell prime minister Najib that these human rights violations are unacceptable."

The protests, the product of rising tensions linked to mooted early elections, spending cuts and political upheavals in neighbouring Thailand and Singapore, echo events across the Muslim world. Many of the participants were reportedly younger-generation Malaysians kicking back against establishment cronyism, curbs on public assembly and debate, and state-imposed censorship considered draconian even by regional standards.

Within hours of the violence, a Facebook petition demanding Najib resign was attracting 300 "likes" per minute, the (Singapore-based) Straits Times reported. As of this morning, more than 172,000 people had expressed support. "I don't understand why the harshness, the beatings," posted Sofie Muhammad. "The crowd didn't even throw stones at the shops. Why is the government afraid? All we want is free elections." Videos were also recorded by protesters.

Marimuthu Manogaran of the Democratic Action party, representing the ethnic Chinese minority, said many of the protesters were "first timers". "Young people [are] coming out there to demand their rights ... and I think that is a good sign for Malaysia," he told Luke Hunt of the Diplomat.

Another report, denied by police, said a hospital where protesters had taken refuge was attacked by security forces – an incident akin to events in Bahrain earlier this year. Appalled by the behaviour of police and federal reserve unit special forces, Bersih 2.0, the opposition "coalition for clean and fair elections", called for a royal commission of inquiry and vowed to continue its reformasi campaign, come what may.

Anwar Ibrahim, the veteran opposition leader endlessly persecuted by successive governments on trumped-up sodomy charges (he is due in court again next month), was among those injured. He said later the government had lost the people's confidence and more street protests were inevitable. "We will have to pursue free elections inside and outside of parliament," he warned.

Far from admitting fault, Najib has threatened more strong-arm tactics if the demos continue. "Don't doubt our strength. If we want to create chaos, we can. Umno has 3 million members. If we gather 1 million members, it is more than enough. We can conquer Kuala Lumpur," he said. Such threats seem ill-advised. When elected in 2009, Najib promised to bridge Malaysia's political, ethnic and religious divisions. Now he's in danger of exacerbating them, as his old boss, Malaysia's founding father Mahathir Mohammed, suggested in a recent interview.

Malaysia is not on the verge of revolution, hibiscus-coloured or otherwise. Relatively speaking, it is more stable, homogenous and prosperous than other Muslim or Arab countries currently experiencing popular turmoil. But it is not politically immune to the international zeitgeist, any more than its economy is immune to global trends. This latter consideration explains why Najib is in London. And it gives Cameron and other European leaders leverage should they choose to use it.



Malaysians need only look north to see how Thai voters defied the political-military establishment and voted in a leader of their choice. When Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi speaks of the twin imperatives of freedom and democracy, she speaks for an entire region. And if Malaysians look south to Singapore or east to Hong Kong, they see entrenched ruling elites under determined challenge by activists emboldened by the spirit of change.

Malaysia's leaders should wake up and smell the coffee. Led intelligently and openly, Malaysia could be a paradigm for south-east Asia. Led repressively, it could fall apart. Najib must get on the right side of history. The Mubarak model doesn't work.

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