

Rich but not free
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Editorial: Malaysia

The leaders of Malaysia are laboring under an old paradigm that says you can have development or democracy, but not both. We have news for them: You can be rich and free at the same time. Malaysians deserve both and they deserve it now — not sometime in the future.

The lengths the government went to in trying to prevent and then break up the Bersih 2.0 rally in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday shows that the nation's leaders were still not prepared to let go — even when an increasing number of Malaysians of all races have been pressing for more freedom and justice.

The rally, defying a government ban, went down as the largest in Malaysian history. It was significant that representatives from all three major races participated.

The government vainly tried to play the race card, suggesting it was a concerted move to undermine the dominant Malay race. Earlier it suggested that the rally was a communist plot.

There was nothing subversive about the rally. It was held to demand electoral reforms ahead of the next election in 2012.

The demonstrators, whose numbers were independently estimated to top 10,000, were simply trying to exercise their rights of free speech and assembly.

They may have defied the law, but they were still marching peacefully. A few clashes erupted when the police tried to break them up. When they did disperse, they did so peacefully.

The police clearly overreacted. They did not need to invoke the Internal Security Act to arrest some of the protest's leaders before Saturday. They certainly did not need to detain more than 1,600 on the day of the demonstration.

Aspirations for freedom and democracy are universal. Governments everywhere will, sooner or later, have to make accommodations. You cannot suppress the people and deprive them of their freedom forever. You must give them their due — or else they will get it by force. The Arab Spring is a case in point.

Given its current economic strength, Malaysia is in an enviable position to allow greater freedom and democracy. It can afford to take some risks without necessarily undermining development. A few powerful people may stand to lose their economic privileges, but they should have been phased out by now.

The Bersih 2.0 rally is the clearest sign that Malaysians want freedom and justice, as well as wealth.

Comments (3)

shake, malaysia | Mon, 11/07/2011 - 14:07pm

A frank analysis.

Unfortunately, Malaysian leaders do not view it like you. They are still living in medieval times.

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dom, malaysia | Mon, 11/07/2011 - 12:07pm

Sir . You have a very clear mind unlike some of the Malaysian leaders who want to hang on to power until kingdom come

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Yahya, Kuala Lumpur | Mon, 11/07/2011 - 11:07am

Thank you for your support! May Malaysia become a real democracy soon!

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