

Today, Malaysians revisit Bersih 2007

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JULY 9 — Despite Putrajaya's best efforts, the authorities failed today to prevent a repeat of the first Bersih street rally four years ago that was credited for shrinking Barisan Nasional's (BN) voter support in Election 2008.

The Najib administration appears to have taken a massive punch to its gut as thousands thronged the city's streets in the afternoon downpour in support of Bersih 2.0's call for electoral reform and ignored the government's description of troublemakers intent of sabotaging Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's leadership.

Bersih 2.0 chief Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan coolly kept her equanimity and remained open to discussions with Putrajaya but the BN government's move to clamp down on her and the grassroots movement she represents turned the veteran lawyer into an icon of dissent.

The clearest thing this rally has showed is that the middle class and civil society are more willing than ever to stand up and act when faced with a government that does not listen when engaged in civil discussion, not even hesitating to pull out all stops and employ public institutions like the police to act against the public.

Even when Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin made a rare intercession to bring both sides to the negotiating table.

International news coverage of the Bersih affair today showed the world armed police personnel launching tear gas and chemically-laced water into thousands of unarmed civilians. It was the same in 2007 when Bersih first marched.

Today's show is more likely to rejuvenate the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) pact's march to claim Putrajaya, a near impossible task in a country where the incumbent controls all levers of the state.

Najib's reputation worldwide is likely to suffer some damage as he has been styling himself a modern, moderate Muslim leader able to effect government and economic reforms to ramp Malaysia into the upper levels of high-income nations.

A Barisan Nasional (BN) deputy minister lamented today the failure of the ruling coalition to discuss terms with the outlawed Bersih 2.0, whose supporters have amassed in the city by the tens of thousands despite a police lockdown of the federal capital.

Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah told The Malaysian Insider that the government "should have discussed the proposal on how to address a peaceful assembly" as recommended by the Human Rights Commission (Suhakam).

"In terms of political communication, we have lots of repair to do," the deputy education minister said.

Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Ismail Omar said a total of 1,401 people, including 13 children, were arrested, but would all be eventually released after investigation, even as he tried to downplay the crowd turnout, claiming only 6,000 took part.

Despite the arrests of Ambiga and other top Bersih 2.0 leaders, the movement managed to gain ground today under the stewardship of national laureate Datuk A. Samad Said who called the rally a "great success" as an estimated 50,000 people turned out in support of their movement.

Counter rallies planned by its critics Umno Youth fizzled out with less than 500 turning up while strident Malay national group Perkasa failed to show for all its thunder.

"I have never seen all the races in Malaysia so united for one cause before," Samad said.

The soft-spoken poet also said the supporters of Bersih 2.0 were more multiracial this time compared to its previous incarnation in 2007 as Bersih.

It is something that Najib will have to ponder as he moves to stamp his mark with his 1 Malaysia idea and New Economic Model (NEM) programmes to revive Malaysia's prosperity and get a popular mandate to continue ruling this country of 28 million people.

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