

UK's Guardian newspaper says Najib must abandon Mubarak model
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, July 14 — The influential *Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom today called the Malaysian government gormless and castigated it for its strong-arm tactics in putting down the Bersih rally, ahead of Datuk Seri Najib Razak's lunch meeting with David Cameron.

The newspaper said Najib will face global backlash for his "characteristic heavy-handedness" in handling last weekend's Bersih rally.

Simon Tisdall, the UK daily's assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist, warned Malaysia's leaders in his column against adopting the "Mubarak model."

The influential journalist said that while it was unlikely that the country was on the verge of an Arab-style uprising, last Saturday's events could spark a "winter of discontent" on the Najib administration.

Describing the Malaysian government as "gormless", Tisdall recounted Saturday's events based on various media reports, saying that the local police had used baton charges, tear gas and water cannons to break up a "peaceful protest".

"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," he wrote.

Tisdall pointed out that one protestor, Baharuddin Ahmad, had died while fleeing the chemical bombardment from the police during the rally, which he said was held to call for an end to a "defective electoral system" that guarantees indefinite power for Najib and Umno.

Amnesty International, he said, had also reported that several demonstrators were beaten by the police and that medical assistance for Baharuddin had only arrived after a 90-minute delay.

"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," he quoted Amnesty International as saying.

He also drew attention to the Facebook fan page calling for Najib's resignation, noting that in just under five days, more than 172,000 Malaysians had expressed their support.

"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," said Tisdall.

Saturday's events, he added, would give Cameron and other European leaders leverage over Malaysia, "should they choose to use it".

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

Tisdall said that unlike many other Arab nations currently facing political turmoil, Malaysia was more stable, homogenous and prosperous.

"Malaysia is not on the verge of revolution, hibiscus-coloured or otherwise. But it is not politically immune to the international zeitgeist," he warned.

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