

Najib's 'reformist credentials' intact despite Bersih fracas, says The Economist
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 5 — Bersih 3.0 has done little to shake Datuk Seri Najib Razak's reformist image, The Economist has said, adding that unlike last year, the political impact from this year's event was likely minimal.

The influential magazine pointed out the different circumstances surrounding both events, saying that the allegations of violence from the electoral reform group's end from last Saturday had lessened its impact this time around.

"It is clear the Bersih won't be able to dominate the moral high ground - at least not on the score of one weekend's theatrics - as they did last year.

"The campaign for electoral reform goes on, but Mr Najib emerges from this year's fracas with his reformist credentials essentially intact, not much worse for the wear," said The Economist in an article dated May 1.

It described this year's rally as more of a "score-draw", and that although there were recurrences of police brutality, the violent actions of some Bersih protesters attacking and overturning a police car "played into the government's hands."

This, said The Economist, allowed PM Najib to claim that the police were the "victims" in the rally and even made Bersih co-chairman Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan concede that some people would think that the rally had "gone wrong" because of the unruly behaviour of some protesters.

"But by comparison last year's rally, despite a relatively small number of protesters, achieved a terrific political impact," it said.

The article also questioned Opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's presence during the April 28 rally, saying that he had "some explaining to do" with regards to accusations that he had "incited" Bersih supporters to push aside police barriers.

"He was caught on video near one of the police barriers talking to one of his colleagues; critics allege that he was inciting supporters to push aside the barriers. Mr Anwar himself says this is nonsense," said the article.

It stated that since the "embarrassment" faced by PM Najib in his administration's handling of last year's Bersih rally, the government had repealed a slew of "outdated" and repressive laws to win back its reforming credentials.

"Bersih rallies have quickly established themselves as something of a ritual in Malaysia's political calendar...the only significant variant is the political impact.

"Last year it was huge- this year it will probably be very little."

The Economist's remarks this time around was a stark contrast to what it had said during last year's rally- which even resulted in the Home Ministry censoring parts of its July edition last year titled "Taken to the cleaners — an overzealous government response to an opposition rally".

The Bersih 3.0 rally, which had begun peacefully enough, resulted in much the same way as Bersih 2.0 last July 9, with riot police seen chasing citizens down the streets of the capital amid the chaotic mix of clouds of tear gas, chemical-laced water and warning bells from police trucks.

The electoral reforms movement has continued to show its dissatisfaction with the government's attempts and promises to reform the country's election processes, despite the formation of a parliamentary panel to look into the matter.

What Bersih has been demanding is that all aspects of the country's polls processes, particularly the present electoral roll, be cleaned in order to ensure that the government is democratically elected into power.

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