

At Bersih rally, a convergence of angry youths and Lake Club members
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 1 — At the Lake Club's Buttery cafe, the sight of nearly a dozen members in bright yellow Bersih t-shirts talking excitedly after taking part in last Saturday's rally for electoral reforms pointed to how dissatisfaction with government had penetrated one of the city's oldest stomping ground of Malaysia's conservative business and political elite

But it was the image of these conservative Malaysians - long associated with the establishment and traditionally pro-government - joining together with many younger, mostly Malay youths to converge on Dataran Merdeka that underscores the depth of frustration that prompted such a discordant group to protest for free and fair elections.

Among the tens of thousands of Bersih supporters were businessmen, corporate leaders, retirees, Barisan Nasional (BN) party members and at least one former diplomat.

And they walked toward Dataran Merdeka together with many angry, Malay youths in an unlikely combination that will be cause for concern for Datuk Seri Najib Razak as he considers when he should call elections.

Analysts suggest that frustration over the government's aloofness to calls for democratic reforms led to a surge in numbers at Saturday's Bersih rally when compared to the previous assembly on July 9 last year.

Najib announced a raft of reforms including a parliamentary committee on electoral improvements and laws to give Malaysians more freedom after tens of thousands marched for free and fair elections last year.

But despite the prime minister's assertion that he wants to make Malaysia the "world's best democracy," many of his reform bills have been labelled cosmetic and Bersih called for last week's rally saying the findings of the parliamentary select committee were disappointing.

Analysts and those who participated in Saturday's aborted sit-in at Dataran Merdeka told The Malaysian Insider they have been "given the runaround" by Najib's administration that has been trying to balance "public expectations and preserving power."

"The people feel they have no other choice. The government's public engagement is process-oriented, involving only a handful of people.

"But the vast majority feel they don't have the opportunity to speak to the government and the desire to see real change isn't met," said Ibrahim Suffian, who runs independent pollsters Merdeka Centre.

This was affirmed by Jared Koh, a 22-year-old Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

undergraduate who said he attended the rally as "there is not much alternative" to voice out his dissatisfaction with the government which "bans everything."

James Chin, who heads social sciences at the Monash University in Sunway, pointed out that frustration over lagging reforms has conquered the sense of fear that has kept the general public in check for decades.

"The sentiment has always been there but they have always been afraid to speak up. But now they are in open defiance," he said.

Syed Muhammad Shafiq Al-Husaini, a 24-year-old student, related how he and his friends "saw a man alone beaten up by police... we chased them out."

Janette Koh, a 62-year-old retiree, also felt "the government is not serious about reforms and being there speaks louder than words."

Ibrahim noted the increase in the number of young Malays and their "energy," pointing to how "they're not willing to wait any more for promises to be fulfilled."

"I joined because I believe that our country's election system is extremely flawed and needs to be fixed," said Aisya Shurfa, 26.

Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, who is also an Umno supreme council member, told The Malaysian Insider on Sunday the rally was noticeably more multiracial and pointed to an "angry and divided" nation.

Bersih chief Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan said she too sensed a "palpable anger" and pointed out that "it is not easy to get the Chinese middle-class to come out and rally."

"People have been getting the runaround and are growing impatient. They feel they have no choice but to go to the streets due to the accumulated grouses," Ambiga told The Malaysian Insider.

At the Lake Club last Saturday, a young Malay waiter also joined in the excited chatter with the club members who took part in the rally.

"Last year the club was empty during the Bersih rally. This year the club is full. Lots of yellow t-shirts," he told some members as he served them drinks.

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