

Bersih 3.0, Government 0.0 again?
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Police crackdown on rally in Kuala Lumpur once again earns international criticism for government

Protesters demanding reform of Malaysia's election laws proved Saturday that they could draw an even bigger crowd than they did in July 2011, with attendance estimated by police at 25,000 and by Bersih at 250,000. Take your pick.

Both sides were claiming propaganda victory in the aftermath. Bersih 3.0, the 150-member coalition of NGOs for free and fair elections, said they had accomplished their goal of drawing massive numbers of protesters to the center of Kuala Lumpur in defiance of the ban on assembly in the historic Independence Square. Government officials said the police had acted responsibly in attempting to control the crowd only to have firebrands charge police lines and overturn a police car. More than 60 protesters were injured along with 11 police, authorities said.

In any case, the event focuses the spotlight on claims that the government, led by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, has refused to accede to Bersih's recommendations to reform the electoral process. Those recommendations included cleansing the electoral rolls, reforms of absentee voting, the use of indelible ink to mark voters' fingers after voting to thwart repeat voting, a minimum campaign period of 21 days, and fair access to the media – a proposal almost impossible to fulfill, since the three major political parties own all the major mainstream news outlets, all of which have been reporting negatively on the plans for the protest.

Bersih has complained that only the indelible ink recommendation was accepted. Bersih also complained that the government pushed through a 3 a.m. measure in parliament to remove the right of candidates or their representatives to observe voter registrations on election day so that opposition leaders would be unable to spot phantom voters, and removed a requirement that all printed materials bear the name of the printer and publisher from campaign materials.

"The government will likely point to the late confrontation and violence as protester-instigated and try to blame them for the need to use a bit of force," said a longtime western observer. "I doubt that view will get much public traction, however. The government will also say they used great restraint, which was true up until the end. We'll know better when arrests and body counts of injured, etc. are known."

For starters, it appeared that the government had miscalculated by banning the rally in the first place. Home Affairs Minister Hishammuddin Hussein earlier on had said the rally hadn't "gained much traction," and that it wasn't a security threat. However, hardliners apparently won out, with the Kuala Lumpur city government banning the event only to have protesters show up from all over the country.

In the end it also appeared that police hadn't learned the lessons from Bersih 2.0, the July 2011 rally in which 1,600 people were arrested and many more were beaten and

brutalized, earning international condemnation for authorities.

Certainly, once again the international press appeared to be firmly on the side of the protesters, with news reports pretty much uniformly leading with police unleashing "tear gas and chemical-laced water Saturday at thousands of demonstrators who demanded fair rules for national elections expected soon."

Although Bersih leaders acknowledged they had lost control of the crowd when the rally ended and a group described as "a few hundred" attempted to push past police barriers to enter the square, clearly seeking to provoke and be arrested in an attempt to win sympathy, it appeared that once again police had overreacted, beating, tear-gassing and dousing those left with chemical laced water from water cannons.

Certainly if the demonstrators were seeking to provoke the police, they got their wish. Both the local and international press including the television network Al Jazeera were filled with pictures of police battering demonstrators with tear gas, beating and kicking them and dragging them away. Some 488 protesters were arrested. News photographers complained that they were arrested and that their cameras were confiscated and emptied when they tried to film the violence.

Leaving aside the violence that marred the episode, "I think it shows that the Bersih movement is still on the rise and can pull more and more people into political action," said the western observer. "Groups were going into the fray knowing that the government and police had announced that it was banned in advance and that they could be arrested. The demonstrators were clearly not cowed or afraid of the authorities. So that plus the sizeable turnout probably means a 'victory' for protesters."

Also the crowd was mixed ethnically, contradicting pro-government assertions that the backbone was made up of minorities, primarily Chinese. With opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, the Democratic Action Party and Parti Islam se-Malaysia, or PAS playing a bigger role, the confrontation had a more clearly opposition flavor than the demonstration that took place in July 2011.

"The opposition proved once again that they can mobilize and organize a very large multi-racial crowd," said another observer. "Bersih 3.0 was an impressive achievement."

At stake for both sides is the upper hand in national elections expected to be called in June, with parliament probably being dissolved sometime in May, as the Barisan Nasional, or national governing coalition, squares off against the Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition led by Anwar. Wong Chin Huat, a university professor and member of the Bersih steering committee, told Asia Sentinel the organization intends to keep pressure on the Election Commission for political reform.

"We will continue the momentum from of the rally, we will press for international observers, we will continue our demands for free and fair elections," Wong said. "We want the public to be aware, to express their objections, and put more pressure on the Election Commission over their questionable political reforms."

Wong said Bersih had made its point clearly to the thousands of protesters, instructing them not to foment violence, only to have a small group surge into police barriers

surrounding the square. The police, he said, overreacted. He himself was beaten and had his glasses knocked off well after the protest had ended as he was walking back from a meeting, he charged. He saw many others being beaten and mistreated as well, he said, with as many as 30 policemen "using a protester like a football."

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