

**Protesters, police clash in Kuala Lumpur**  
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Her eyes reddened by tear gas and her clothes soaking wet from a heavy downpour, Hamidah Ibrahim, a 23-year-old undergraduate from the northern city of Ipoh, huddled against a shop wall in Tun Perak Road, a main thoroughfare in Kuala Lumpur that is usually clogged with vehicles but on Saturday was crowded with thousands of protestors. Across the street, red-helmeted officers of Malaysia's Federal Reserve Unit fired several rounds of tear gas at the crowds before a baton charge that sent protestors running helter-skelter. Hamidah wiped her eyes and adjusted her tudung, the Malay headscarf that is obligatory for Muslim women. "This is like being in hell," she says amid the thud of smoke grenade launchers.

Thousands of young people like Hamidah, many bused in from across the country and wearing yellow t-shirts emblazoned with the word Bersih, or "clean," in Malay, joined Saturday's protests in favor of free and fair elections. Bersih, a group of the same name made up of opposition parties and dozens of non-governmental organizations, is protesting what they claim have been rampant irregularities in recent elections, alleging voter fraud, gerrymandering and the use of government spending to sway voters. (The government, in response, denies the fraud allegations and accuses its critics of trying to paint development aid as an election offense.)

Bersih had planned a rally at Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka Square, followed by a three-kilometer march to the Istana Nagara, the palace of the Malaysian king, to hand over a memorandum urging the king to ensure that the next national elections are free and fair. But police, who had refused to grant a permit for the rally, threw a cordon of trucks, barriers and riot troops around the square. By 8am, the center of the city resembled a fortress prepared for an invasion, with armed police in pairs at every street corner. "We will take tough action if they proceed," national police chief Musa Hassan had said on Wednesday, a warning that was repeated almost daily in the days preceding the rally. On Friday, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi weighed in with his own warning. "They are challenging me and I don't like being challenged," Abdullah told a crowd of 3,500 delegates at a assembly of the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) on Friday, urging the rally be canceled.

But in the end, about 30,000 protestors managed to get through the police cordon in the biggest display of public anger since the 1998 protests following the sacking and arrest of then-deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy and corruption charges. At the palace gate, Anwar, now a leader of the opposition, described the rally as an "unqualified success" as other opposition party leaders handed the memorandum to palace officials through the bars of the gate under the gaze of more than 1,000 armed police.

Analysts say the large turnout is a sign of growing resentment against Abdullah's perceived failure to curb rising crime, corruption and racial and religious divisions since taking over in November 2003. "They came out not just because of election reform but also to highlight a host of other grievances," says James Wong, a political analyst for the Malaysian news website Malaysiakini.com. "Clearly the government is shaken by the turnout." Another observer, a political science lecturer at the National University of Malaysia who declined to be named citing university rules, noted that many of Saturday's protestors appeared to be young, working-class Malays, as opposed to the members of Malaysia's English-educated elite who turned out to support Anwar a decade ago. "It is significant that the urban Malay

poor is protesting," he says, noting it could be a sign of dissatisfaction with the New Economic Policy (NEP), the four-decade-old affirmative action program to help ethnic Malays that critics charge now mostly benefits the country's ruling elite.

On Sunday, Malaysian police said that they had detained 245 people in connection with the protest; although all have been released, they could be charged later and face up to a year in prison for taking part in an illegal assembly. With Abdullah likely to call elections before March 2008, experts expect more protests — and tougher police action — as the government hardens its stance in the face of the opposition's demands.

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