



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 128 | August 10, 2011

People Power in Malaysia: Bersih Rally and Its Aftermath

BY BRIDGET WELSH

Malaysia captured international headlines with the July 9 Bersih rally for clean and fair elections. However, it was not so much the rally itself—estimated to have included as many as 50,000 people—as it was the woeful mishandling of the event by authorities, involving the indiscriminate use of tear gas and the arrest of nearly 2,000 people before and during the event. This rally has served to reveal the sharp fault lines that exist within Malaysian society and deepened the challenges that current Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak faces in winning his first mandate at the polls. Bersih 2.0 illustrates how Malaysia continues to call for political reforms and deeper democracy, despite an incumbent that remains at best ambivalent to substantive political reform.

The rally's call was modest, aiming to bring about reform to the electoral process. Its eight demands included calling for standard international practices of electoral accountability such as the use of indelible ink to the adoption of overseas voting. Yet, Bersih became much more than calls for changes in elections. It showcased the insecurities of the ruling Barisan Nasional government, which adopted an over-the-top response to the rally from the start, outlawing the Bersih organization and even arresting those who wore yellow clothing, the color of the movement. The government's failure to fulfill its promise of allowing the rally to take place in a stadium crossed the threshold of reasonableness for many Malaysians. This was a tipping point for many of the urban electorate as the credibility of the government was undermined. This lack of credibility in Malaysia's government was compounded by bold denials of police actions that were witnessed by many and later posted on social media.

Bersih has brought to the surface deep-seated insecurities among Malaysia's incumbent elite who have held onto power since 1957. The incompetent government response included arresting and labeling activists as "communists"—including prominent opposition MP Jeyakumar Devaraj—and the arbitrary use of the draconian Emergency Ordinance (detention without trial law) which dates back to British colonial rule. Mahathir-like conspiracy theories of outside powers and agents reemerged as civil society organizations were investigated and offices searched. The leaders of Bersih, notably its chairwoman Ambiga Sreenevasan, were threatened and harassed. Charges against those who participated are still pending. These reactionary moves conflicted sharply with the efforts by Prime Minister Najib to win public support, and in the process alienated Malaysians who found the incredulous charges and resort to the past not in keeping with the more modern and open reality of contemporary Malaysia. The government reaction included reportedly firing tear gas into the compound of a maternity hospital, an illustration that the police were not following their mandate to protect citizens. In this modern age of social media, the Malaysian government forgot that it too has to be accountable for its actions, and no amount of denial can stand up to YouTube footage and multiple witnesses.

Bridget Welsh, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Singapore Management University, predicts that "In the months ahead in Malaysia the contest for political power will intensify, with the issue of political reform squarely at the core. It will culminate at the next general election, which will be the most competitive in the country's history and a next big test of whether Malaysia will further democratize with Najib Tun Razak at its helm."



“What distinguishes today’s reform drive is the centrality of human rights and civil liberty concerns, as Malaysians have increasingly taken power into their own hands, from voting to protest. There is an expectation, especially in urban areas and among the young, for increased consultation and inclusion, and rejection of curbs on freedom.”

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center.

EastWestCenter.org

EastWestCenter.org/Washington

Ironically, the events surrounding July 9 have acted to reenergize the reform agenda and Malaysia’s opposition. The focus has returned to the need for political reform—accountable institutions, professionalism, fairness, and anti-corruption. These issues favor the opposition, whose call for “change” still resonates with the electorate and has done so since the 1998-99 *Reformasi* movement. What distinguishes today’s reform drive is the centrality of human rights and civil liberty concerns, as Malaysians have increasingly taken power into their own hands, from voting to protest. There is an expectation, especially in urban areas and among the young, for increased consultation and inclusion, and rejection of curbs on freedom. Malaysians are increasingly among the global rise of the “freedom generation” that has broken down the barriers of fear against oppressive state authority and expanded people’s power nationally. Another important feature of the Bersih movement has been its multi-ethnicity, which has gone in the face of efforts in the past three years of racial politics, as Malaysians have shown solidarity across communities. While this reform drive is largely urban and middle class, it has transformed Malaysian politics and discourse, putting the current leadership on the defensive.

Prime Minister Najib has impressively won support during his two-plus years in office since April 2009 with his promises of economic reform. He has been seen to recognize problems and sought to address them. His popularity has steadily increased as he personally distanced himself from the more extreme side of racial politics. Najib appeared to be heading toward a solid majority electoral victory at the next Malaysian general election. Yet, in July around Bersih, something went radically wrong. By choosing to distance himself from the rally’s modest demands and the subsequent crackdown along with the failure to deliver on the promise of the rally in the stadium, he lost ground. He did not appear to be in charge, instead abdicating his leadership role. This brought a barrage of criticism from the electorate, but it also brought out challengers within his own party, many of whom opposed his economic reform agenda and are unhappy with their positions and rewards within the party.

As a result, Najib has become increasingly vulnerable on two fronts and faces an uphill battle to regain public support and maintain his standing within his own party. He now faces a stark choice: to move forward with political reforms or to pander to the rapacious interests of some actors within his own party who appear more interested in themselves than national development or reconciliation. In short, he can choose to follow the march of the people toward reform, or turn inward toward a party where the reactionary responses of many of its members are not in keeping with modern Malaysia. The choices Najib makes in the post-Bersih context will affect his political future.

Malaysia’s Bersih movement has its historical roots in demands for better governance, inclusion, and more accountability. Its form however is uniquely of today—with its embeddedness in social media, wide participation of civil society and sense of people empowerment along with its multi-ethnic composition that makes Bersih truly national in scope. This broad trend toward “People Power” is one that extends across the region, beginning in the Philippines and Indonesia, and spreading more recently to Thailand and Singapore. People in Southeast Asia expect more from their leaders including consultation, accountability and a focus on national welfare across social cleavages. Bersih and its aftermath reveals the underlying push for democracy driven by the people and the push back from entrenched incumbents holding onto power, a pattern that has had regional similarities.

In the months ahead in Malaysia the contest for political power will intensify, with the issue of political reform squarely at the core. It will culminate at the next general election, which will be the most competitive in the country’s history and a next big test of whether Malaysia will further democratize with Najib Tun Razak at its helm.