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More than a Cake Party: Evolving Protest in Malaysia

By Choong Pui Yee

Synopsis

Malaysians created a new definition for protest by throwing cake parties. This has interesting implications for the government and the way protest is evolving in Malaysia.

Commentary

AFTER PRIME Minister Najib Tun Razak tabled the 2011 budget on 16 October 2010 in which he allocated a whopping RM 5 billion to build a 100-storey skyscraper in the capital Kuala Lumpur, an anonymous Malaysian created a Facebook page entitled '1M Malaysians Reject 100-storey Mega Tower'. The objective of the page was to rally one million like-minded Malaysians to oppose the building of the Mega Tower. Within two weeks, the page added 200,000 friends, mostly Malaysians from different ethnic groups and ages. In effect, a new protest group had been formed.

A Different Kind of Cake Party

To commemorate its first month on 16 November 2010, the group called for a cake party celebration. Eight locations in different cities of Malaysia were selected to hold this cake party that evening. In addition, Malaysians working in Singapore and Texas were to have their cake parties overseas to show solidarity.

Justifying the reason for the cake celebration, the administrator of the page wrote: "This is not the first mega-project, but this is the first time a mega-project is facing organised resistance from the bottom-up. No mega-project from now on can be bulldozed against public opinion. That's why we celebrate!"

On the evening of the cake party itself, there was tightened security in several locations marked for the cake party. In Kampar, 14 policemen were deployed at the McDonalds outlet selected for the party. Despite early warning that there would be policemen stationed, there were still a handful of people who turned up at the McDonalds outlet for the cake party. They included students from the nearby University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) campus who joined the cake party despite being warned against it by the Vice-President of UTAR. Similarly, there were some security guards in the Suria KLCC building in KL who dispersed the small groups congregating around the fountain for the cake party.

Implications of the Cake Party

On the surface, there seems nothing significant in small groups of Malaysians meeting publicly to eat cakes together for a cause. However, a closer look at the event may reveal far-reaching implications. Firstly, the way

the cake-parties were started shows that Malaysians have found the safest and fastest way for organised protest, which is through the virtual realm. In this case, Malaysians have utilised the social network platform, Facebook to attract like-minded netizens to make their voices heard. All they needed to demonstrate their displeasure over the 'Mega Tower' project was to make a few clicks on their computers in the comfort of their home. Besides, they could conceal their real identities. Hence, the virtual platform has made protest easier, safer and perhaps much more effective. While the virtual realm can be dismissed as a non-tangible platform, one can hardly dismiss its effectiveness in rallying large numbers of like-minded Malaysians for a particular cause. The numbers joining the page is the best evidence of this. Furthermore, although it began as a protest over the Mega Tower, the page has now expanded to become a platform for discussions on good governance and other socio-political issues concerning Malaysia.

Secondly, by celebrating its turning one month, the virtual page is also building up a sense of solidarity among its members. Those who attended the cake parties no doubt found the experience exciting and symbolic as well as a bonding event; they are likely to share this experience in their net postings thus building-up the sense of community among page members. Perhaps, it may even embolden Malaysians netizens to come together on other issues in the future.

Creative Non-Partisan Dissent

The 'cake party' has essentially showcased the creativeness of Malaysians in opposing government policies. Aware that any outright protest is fraught with risks and the danger of arrest, they have moved on to a quiet and creative way of protesting, that is not disruptive, but is nimble and has the potential of strengthening the solidarity of like-minded Malaysians. Also worth highlighting is that the protest was a non-partisan effort -- the sole purpose of the cake party was for Malaysians to come together to oppose the building of the Mega Tower.

A question that needs to be addressed is how the Malaysian government will handle such forms of protest, especially if the cake party has a snowball effect. Essentially, it will definitely be harder for them in the battle ground of the virtual realm. Anyone can post a random call in the Internet to rally like-minded citizens for a common cause. And it will be difficult to stop them when there is a call to act. Any hard action will only serve to create more bad publicity for the government especially when most Malaysians are consumers of Facebook. Finally, any action the government takes may not be effective in stemming criticism of it in the Internet. It may just propel Malaysians into more creative ways of expressing their opposition in the virtual realm.

It has to be said that Malaysians have illustrated their creativeness and political acumen in the use of the Internet as a protest platform. However, one can only hope such ways of protest will not turn ugly, since not all calls for action against the government may be as civil as this injunction to eat cake. Lastly, in the spirit of Malaysia Boleh, perhaps cake eating for many Malaysians will be loaded with meaning from now onwards.

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