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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **After the Bersih 2.0 Rally: Impact and Implications**

By Farish A. Noor

### **Synopsis**

*The Bersih 2.0 rally in Kuala Lumpur did not end in widespread violence and inter-ethnic conflict as initially feared, though there was fracas between the police and protesters. But the handling of the rally by the authorities may incur political costs at the next general election.*

### **Commentary**

THE BERSIH 2.0 rally on Saturday 9 July 2011 was mounted by more than 60 Malaysian civil society organisations who called for free and fair elections in the country. From the outset the organisers of Bersih 2.0 insisted that the rally was not meant to be a campaign for any of the political parties. However it was supported by the opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat, whose leaders joined the march in Kuala Lumpur Central.

As the date of the rally grew closer, anti-Bersih groups began to mobilise against the movement. The ethno-nationalist Malay rights group Perkasa went as far as to warn that should the rally take place there might be racial violence in the Klang valley area. In the final days before the rally, other groups, including Malay martial arts organisations also joined in the chorus demonising Bersih, threatening to send its members to the rally to 'fight against the enemies and traitors of the country'. Other forms of intimidation included threatening sms-es, emails, leaflets and banners. Some went as far as calling for the organisers of Bersih to be detained, stripped of their citizenship, even threatened with violence and rape.

### **Government's response: mixed signals**

The reaction of the Najib administration was one that was confusing for the public and the security apparatus alike. From the outset the government resisted the appeals by Bersih's organisers for a permit to hold their rally. The 'Patriot' Youth front of the ruling UMNO party also claimed that they would have a counter-rally on the same day.

The confusion was compounded just days before the rally when the prime minister seemed to relent, by stating that the rally organisers would be permitted to have the rally provided it was held in an enclosed stadium. However, he was almost immediately contradicted when the Home Affairs Minister Hishammuddin Hussein Onn declared that the Bersih group was an illegal organisation. That compelled the police to act according to their standard operational procedures (SOP).

A late intervention by the King, who met with Bersih 2.0 organisers, calling upon both Bersih and the government to negotiate their differences amicably, raised hopes of a compromise, besides lending some

legitimacy to the Bersih movement. However the Police remained adamant that no rally should take place in KL. The day before the planned rally, the main roads were closed off by the police and 91 individuals were ordered not to enter the city. The list included most of the Bersih 2.0 organisers but also leaders of the anti-Bersih groups. Notwithstanding these preventive measures tens of thousands of Malaysians of all ages and ethnic groups filled the streets to march towards the Merdeka Stadium. They were dispersed by riot police with tear gas and water cannons and 1,600 marchers including the leaders of Bersih were arrested in the six-hour confrontation. All were released the same night after questioning.

### **Confrontation and fall-out**

While it is debatable whether the Bersih rally achieved its target of 50,000 participants, the organisers claimed a moral victory for the simple reason that over 20,000 people did come out on the streets. Bersih-inspired gatherings took place in 24 other cities from New York to Melbourne, thereby giving the movement an international profile.

The most intriguing development was the non-appearance of the leaders of the vocal Perkasa movement, including its leader Ibrahim Ali, who stayed at home despite his fiery anti-Bersih rhetoric in the run-up to the rally. The counter-rally organised by UMNO Youth drew only a few hundred supporters. None of the Malay martial arts groups who had threatened to 'go to war' against Bersih appeared, and not a single incident of ethnic violence occurred. By dusk the crowds had dispersed, with both Bersih and the government claiming victory. Prime Minister Najib, who was scheduled to fly to the Vatican for a meeting with the Pope, postponed his trip and did a walking tour of the affected areas the day after. Two days after the event a Facebook page calling on the prime minister to resign received 100,000 positive hits.

### **Implications**

A number of observations can be made of the Bersih 2.0 rally. Firstly, the absence of Perkasa and the martial arts groups from the scene suggests that they may have been advised not to provoke the larger Malaysian public who are opposed to all forms of communal violence and intimidation. The racially-sensitive rhetoric of groups like Perkasa failed to intimidate the public or secure the support of the Malaysian Malay community.

An overwhelming majority of those who supported the Bersih 2.0 rally on 9 July were from the Malay community. It remains unclear how or why groups like Perkasa continue to receive implicit support and protection from the establishment -- despite evidence to suggest that Perkasa has actually cost UMNO and the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) more support than it has gained.

Secondly, although Bersih 2.0 was fundamentally a civil society initiative, the support shown by some opposition parties like PAS gave the impression that it had become politicised. Bersih 2.0's leaders, however, maintained that theirs was a simple issue-driven rally calling for free and fair elections; it is therefore vital to keep the two sets of actors -- Bersih and the opposition parties -- separate.

Thirdly, PAS' support for Bersih 2.0 demonstrates clearly that the Malaysian Islamic party is now committed to the opposition Pakatan Rakyat alliance and will contest the next general election as part of the tripartite alliance. All talk of a 'unity government' between UMNO and PAS was drowned after 7 July, when it was clear that the rally had received support from all the senior leaders of the Islamic party. This effectively means that UMNO can no longer rely on residual Malay communal solidarity to shore up its support in the next Malaysian general election, the timing of which now remains an open question.

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