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Malaysia's Bersih 3.0: Sentiments, Perceptions and Politics

By Choong Pui Yee

Synopsis

The 28 April mass protest in Malaysia for clean and fair elections has taken a somewhat violent turn, the cause for which has become a matter of mutual recrimination between its organisers and the authorities. Realpolitik will eventually decide the outcome.

Commentary

MALAYSIA MARKED another political chapter when the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) mobilised hundreds of thousands of Malaysians for a third protest for electoral reform - Bersih 3.0 - on 28 April 2012. Similar to the second Bersih protest in 2011, the movement had grown beyond the country's borders to involve -- in a show of solidarity -- overseas Malaysians in more than 80 cities.

In Kuala Lumpur, the initially peaceful demonstration turned ugly as some protesters breached the barricaded Merdeka Square and police officers shot teargas and chemical-laced water to turn them back. The incident has raised the political stakes in the upcoming general election expected anytime soon. Prime Minister Najib Razak has accused the electoral reform movement of trying to overthrow the government a la Egypt's Tahrir Square uprising last year while the opposition has in turn dismissed the charge as an overreaction to the protests of the people.

Platform for public mobilisation

The emotional factor is imperative to explain the massive support that Bersih received as ordinary Malaysians took to the streets. In Kuala Lumpur alone, the Bersih committee estimated 250,000 supporters turned out - the largest public protest in recent years. A supporter who refused to be identified confessed that he was frustrated with the electoral fraud and the rally was his only platform to express his feelings and make his voice count. Other protesters from different parts of Malaysia interviewed before the rally shared similar sentiments.

During the rally, some supporters were heard chanting Bersih! and Reformasi! while others sang songs in support of Bersih. It was almost like a national carnival - until a group tried to enter the barricaded Merdeka Square, causing the police to push them back with tear gas. What was originally a peaceful protest turned ugly, enraging the crowd. As police detained several protesters, some forcefully, there was even more agitation and the carnival-like mood turned into collective anger. Shouting spats from both parties ensued. A police car was also overturned. The rally has clearly served as a platform to mobilise the public as Malaysians from different

classes and ethnic backgrounds gathered together for a common cause – in a rare but growing display of inter-ethnic solidarity. Such sentiments and sense of empowerment will deepen the wedge between the Bersih supporters and the incumbent government.

Perceptions and political dimension

Given the outpouring of sentiment against the ruling coalition for what is seen as shortcomings in the electoral system, many Malaysians will anticipate the upcoming general election with defiance. The opposition parties had capitalised on this outpouring to boost their own popularity and had been accused of hijacking the Bersih protest movement. Opposition coalition de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim's appearance in the rally is indicative of the reality that a popular civil society movement's cause can easily conflate with the opposition's agenda to become a broader rallying point that will not favour the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN).

Although Bersih had stated it welcomed any political party to join its cause, the fact that there were only opposition parties that openly connected with the civil society coalition of 84 groups would create the perception that Bersih could easily turn into an anti-establishment movement. At the same time, the failure of Bersih to manage the crowd and the conduct of some unruly protesters could be easily used against the movement.

Civil society or political movement?

All this notwithstanding, the combined effect of the massive civil society protest and opposition mobilisation brought to the fore the groundswell of dissatisfaction that has been festering. The government cannot easily ignore this. While the sentiments of the protesters could influence voting patterns in the upcoming general election, the post-rally battle of perceptions will continue to be amplified by both sides of the political divide. As much as Bersih has tried to brand itself as a civil society movement, politics in Malaysia is not mature enough to allow such a clear distinction to be made; Bersih will always be seen to have a political dimension.

Still, it appears that Bersih had won more moral ground in creating a higher political awareness for clean and fair elections among Malaysians, not only within the country but also within the Malaysian diaspora overseas. Bersih has also emboldened Malaysians to be part of the democratic process. But sentiments aside, electoral politics is still a battle of realpolitik. It remains to be seen whether Malaysia's electoral politics will get any cleaner.

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