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Red or yellow, rallies add colour to democracy

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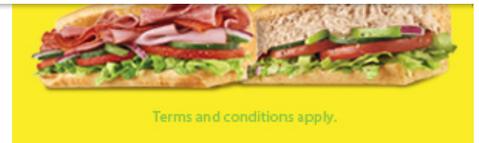

On the day that Bersih 4 organisers were called in for questioning by the police, Wednesday, this reminder about how democracy is practiced was spotted. — AZMAN GHANI/TheStar

First, there was the Bersih 4 rally that ended peacefully. Now the Red Shirts are planning a counter-rally. Could it be that Malaysian society is actually maturing, and that peaceful rallies are to become part and parcel of our democratic life?

LAST weekend during the 34-hour Bersih 4 rally in Kuala Lumpur, Suhakam Commissioner James Nayagam's heart was in his mouth.

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While the huge crowd was largely controlled and relatively well-behaved, and the police were facilitating the rally and traffic, he knew from past experience that it would take only one or two troublemakers for the situation to turn ugly very quickly.

He lived through “tear gas burning my eyes” during the Bersih 2 and Bersih 3 rallies previously, when the police fired tear gas and turned water cannons on protestors and chased them all over KL to disperse their illegal assembly.

So Bersih 4 was a “high anxiety” time for him and the rest of the Suhakam team members who were on the ground around Dataran Merdeka to monitor the rally – which, by the way, was a first for public rallies in Malaysia in terms of the record number of hours (34 hours) and that it was an overnighter.

It was also different with the police.

While the police made a lot of stern noise right up to the last moment about the Bersih 4 rally being illegal and all that, they did not crack down on the thousands who showed up in their yellow Bersih T-shirts nor did they arrest the organisers who got onto various stages to give speech after speech.

In other words, they allowed the show to go on. And that has much to do with the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 being put into place.

Nayagam says the OCPD and the Commanding Officer came up to him personally at Dataran Merdeka to talk.

“They were friendly, understanding and approachable, unlike the past. The tension is lesser when there is a working relationship between the two sides (the police and the protestors),” he says.

Nonetheless, Nayagam was on edge on both days in case protestors pushed past the barricades around Dataran Merdeka and all hell broke loose.

On the first day three men did try but the Bersih marshals refused to let them through.

Nayagam confesses he was particularly nervous at night. He dropped by Dataran Merdeka late Saturday night again to check on the situation.

“The police themselves assured me that it was all right. That was a plus point, and I took consolation in the fact that the night went by without any incident.”

Both days, he slept very late because he was monitoring the situation and making sure each day ended peacefully, and that everyone got home safely without any untoward incidents.

“The organisers and the police had my mobile number and I was available at any time if they needed to call me to mediate,” he says.

So it was a huge relief for him that the rally was orderly and went on peacefully, and that both sides kept to their obligations.

He says protestors not trying to break through the barricades was crucial in maintaining the trust with the police.

“I must especially commend the police for maintaining the peace. They were a silent presence there and kept to their obligations well.

“This gives us the precedent of what we can expect at a peaceful assembly when both parties work together.”

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Other than the usual Bersih mantra for free and fair elections and the call for a clean government, the protestors – concerned about economic woes caused by rising prices, GST, and the depreciating value of the ringgit – also wanted the country's economy to be "saved".

They were demanding answers about the RM2.6bil in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's personal account and where it came from and where it went. And they had just as many questions, if not more, about the 1MDB issue. They also wanted the right to express dissent and wanted Najib to step down.

For Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia political scientist Assoc Prof Datuk Dr Mohammad Agus Yusoff, such rallies are just a form of political expression, which every citizen has the right to enjoy.

He points out that some tried to play up the image of a few protestors stepping on the photo of the prime minister and PAS president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang and calling it a failure of Bersih.

Political party leaders like DAP's Lim Kit Siang and MCA's Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai have both come out to condemn the stomping of the photos of the leaders, saying it is unacceptable.

"No doubt it is disrespectful and not part of our culture, but I do think such things do happen in a protest," says Dr Agus, adding that, "It is also true of other demonstrations we've seen in the country when the picture of politicians or party flags are burned.

"So I don't think it is appropriate to highlight that as violence or a failure of the Bersih 4 rally," he says.

It is undeniable that the rally comprised a predominantly Chinese crowd.

This has to do mostly with the fact that PAS – which used to bring in the huge Malay crowd at previous Bersih rallies – chose to stay away this time.

Dr Agus says while fewer Malays came for the rally because they followed PAS's directive not to go, this does not mean that the rally was a "Chinese or racist thing".

"Why is it that everything is seen in racist terms? I don't see it as being racist. There were fewer Malays there because PAS did not support this rally, and because the Malays who are civil servants were afraid to come out and get involved (for fear of repercussions)."

Dr Agus says this does not mean that the Malays are not sensitive and responsive to current political developments.

"They are watching and observing from the sidelines. So don't think that because the Malays did not come out this time that there is no support for change," he warns.

This is why Barisan Nasional and Umno should self-assess to see what they can do to correct and strengthen themselves, he says.

Dr Khoo Yin Hooi, a senior lecturer in Universiti Malaya who specialises in social movement and democratisation, believes the impact from the "Yellow Fever Magic" is about more than just the numbers at the rally.

"I went around Klang last weekend and saw that people who couldn't go for the rally were wearing the yellow Bersih T-shirt or something yellow to show support. It was very noticeable," she says.



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And when Dr Khoo went to KL to have a look at the Bersih 4 rally, she felt a bit “strange” because it was “extremely carnival-like” and none of the FRU red trucks that she had become accustomed to seeing at previous assemblies were anywhere to be seen this time.

Although there were not as many Malays there, she says people felt the rally went beyond race, and those attending didn’t feel they were Chinese, Indian or Malay.

Some of her own family members who are Malay, she says, asked her about it when in the past they had not bothered.

“So I can see a shift. Street demonstrations are not something everyone buys into. It is something very new, but I can see that the support, including the silent support, is much bigger than the crowd,” she says.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was a surprise show on the first day of the rally. Although he only spent a few minutes on the ground, he must have made an impact because more Malays showed up at the rally on the second day.

While Dr Khoo wouldn’t call Bersih 4 a success, she wouldn’t call it a failure either, she says.

“It’s about building up the momentum and pressure. I see it as a process. It does not translate into immediate success or institutional reforms the next day.”

Although the police did not stop the rally, once it was over they did call the organisers in for questioning.

And Urban Well Being, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Rahman Dahlan said Bersih organisers should pay the RM65,000 clean up bill because protestors had left behind rubbish and urine in a number of places.

But the rally organisers had set up teams to do the cleaning, and groups were seen to be constantly sweeping and cleaning rubbish from the streets during the rally.

So it comes as no surprise that the organisers, Bersih 2.0, have said through their chief, Maria Chin, that they will not pay.

Suhakam’s Nayagam says one has to look at precedence to see if any other organisers holding public gatherings over the years have ever been billed for clean up and if they had paid.

“That’ll be a question everybody will ask. If not, why is this the first time? Does it mean that is if it is a legal assembly you don’t have to be pay but if it is deemed ‘illegal’ then you pay?” says Nayagam, adding that under the Peaceful Assembly Act there is no such thing as an illegal assembly any more because all organisers have to do now is give prior notice to the police that they are planning to have one.

Angered by the Bersih 4 rally and the stomping of the photos of the Malay leaders, the Red Shirts, who are anti-Bersih and pro-Najib, are planning to hold two separate rallies, promising to bring a million people out on the streets.

The Red Shirts had initially wanted to hold a counter rally at the same time as Bersih 4 but was persuaded to call it off after a meeting with the police.

Sungai Besar Umno division chief Datuk Jamal Md Yunos says they are now planning one with a million supporters around Low Yat and Bukit Bintang on Oct 10.

“The Chinese came around Dataran and Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman and *serang*

(disrupted) Malay businesses in those areas so we want to do the same in a Chinese area," he says.

Jamal says the objective is to show the people's solidarity for the country's leader.

"We don't care if the police allow it or not. We are going to have our gathering from morning till night. Bersih 4 left human waste near the flower pots around Dataran Merdeka so we are going to show that we can do better than that!" he says.

The other Red Shirts group, Himpunan Rakyat Bersatu, is planning to hold theirs on Sept 16 in Bukit Bintang and Petaling Street. They, too, want to show Malay solidarity against the Bersih rally and express anger over the stomping of the photos of Malay leaders.

Dr Khoo says when there is a movement, it is normal to have a counter-movement. For her, protests are rational and a form of patriotism. So it is only fair to allow the Red Shirts to have their own public rally.

But she stresses it has to be peaceful.

"If they play up violence and racial issues, then it shouldn't be allowed," she says, pointing out that the Red Shirts video of a show of strength with silat demonstrations and members hitting each other with sticks was threatening and scary.

Dr Agus too is all for the Red Shirts having their rally.

He says the country's Constitution and the Peaceful Assembly Act allows for such political expression.

"If they want to show 'This is the Malay struggle'. 'This is Malay sovereignty' or 'This is the kind of Malaysia that we the Red Shirts want to mould', that is fine."

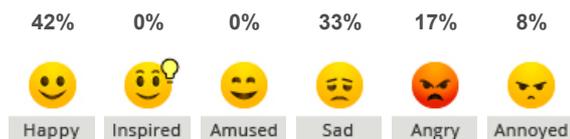
He says then the duties of the authorities would be to just facilitate.

"But it would not be right if it is provocative, to get people to fight, cause chaos, violence or even death. We have laws, so whoever wants to hold a rally has to abide by the laws for a peaceful rally. Let us celebrate our differences.

"Because at the end of the day it is the people who assess and choose what they prefer. And that is what we want."

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