

Bersih Democracy Movement to Take Over the Streets Again

Thursday 19 April 2012, by [BOYLE Peter](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2012).

The [Coalition of Free and Fair Elections \(know as Bersih\)](#) — which means “clean” in Malay) called for a mass sit in on April 28 because it suspected that the country's entrenched Barisan Nasional (BN) government was about to call a general election before addressing widespread electoral irregularities. The irregularities were confirmed by a review forced on the government by the [previous Bersih 2.0 mass rally](#) on July 9 last year.

The government banned the Bersih 2.0 protest. It set up roadblocks around the capital Kuala Lumpur, carried out pre-emptive arrests of activists and tried to ban the wearing of yellow clothes, the colour used by the movement.

Yet about 50,000 defied the riot squad, tear gas attacks and 1600 arrests and took to the streets.

It became the “Malaysian Spring”. Stories, photos and amateur video footage of great bravery and perseverance of the “rakyat”, the ordinary people of Malaysia, went viral in the social media.

One image that was etched in the hearts of millions of Malaysian democracy activists was that of tear-gassed 65-year old retired teacher Annie Ooi Siew Lan — [later popularly dubbed “Auntie Bersih” — walking away from riot police line, wearing her “banned” yellow t-shirt and clutching a water bottle and a small bunch of flowers.](#)

Bersih 3.0 organisers hope to at least double the numbers coming out. More than 53 Bersih solidarity actions are planned in 18 other countries.

The movement is making three demands:

1. The election commission must resign, as it has failed in its responsibility and has lost the confidence of the public.
2. The electoral process must be cleaned before the [next] general elections.
3. Invite international observers to observe the general elections.

If these conditions are not met, the movement fears the BN government will rig the election.

Malaysian Socialist Party (PSM) MP Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj told Green Left Weekly: “More than 50% of the urban population, maybe as high as 70% in certain areas, supports the opposition Pakatan Rakyat front.

“Many of these supporters are deeply suspicious of the BN. They feel that the BN regularly cheats in the elections, and that this time they are packing the electoral roll with foreign workers. Information recently received by the Electoral Commission seems to indicate that there is hanky-panky going on.

“Let me give some examples. The parliamentary seat of Kota Raja has had a huge increase of voters

— an increase of 32% over the number on the roll in March 2008. The overall increase for the country as a whole is about 10%, and the neighbouring parliamentary constituency of Klang had an increase of about 13%.

“Similarly, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim’s daughter Nurul Izzah’s seat of Lembah Pantai witnessed an increase in voters of 26% since March 2008 while the neighbouring seat of Siputeh only experienced a 5% increase.

“The rumour mills are working overtime. People allege that thousands of foreign workers have been given identification papers and that they have been asked to vote for the ruling coalition. Something like this did actually occur in the state of Sabah, so it is not a totally outlandish suspicion.”

Jeyakumar said there “is a perception that massive cheating is going to take place.

“Then we have the open warning by the prime minister that the ruling coalition will hold on to power whatever happens. He now says that it was just rhetoric to motivate his party members, but people are worried that he would hang on to power by extra-parliamentary means.

“The BN has gone on an open vote-buying spree. Five hundred Malaysian Ringgit [about A\$160] has been given out as cash handouts to around 70% of Malaysian families. One hundred Ringgit has been given to all school children. This is significant because around 35% of Malaysian families earn a monthly income below 2000 Ringgit.

“All this is unprecedented, and underlines the fact that the ruling coalition feels itself under threat. Meanwhile, BN politicians and their proxies are trying to stir up ethnic-religious anxieties.

“So people feel that we need to mobilise peoples’ power to make sure that the peoples’ will as expressed by the polls is respected.”

Jeyakumar noted the BN government’s “marked departure from their aggressive authoritarian stance over Bersih 2.0. The government is playing it cautiously now.”

Global Bersih

David Teoh, a Malaysian currently working in Australia, helped organise a very successful global component to the Bersih 2.0 action last July. He played a direct role in organising actions in Australia, the biggest of which drew about 1000 Malaysians and their supporters in Melbourne’s Federation Square.

This year, Teoh told GLW that he expects even bigger global Bersih mobilisations.

“We had Malaysians in 38 cities supporting Bersih 2.0,” he said. “This time around, we have banded together to increase the number of global locations and to get the message out there to Malaysians and non-Malaysians alike in support of Bersih 3.0.

“The [Global Bersih website](#) will serve as a one stop centre for all Global-related Bersih news.

“Juxtaposed with the police violence against Bersih 2.0 in Kuala Lumpur, the Global Bersih movement proved to be highly embarrassing on the government as Malaysians abroad assembled peacefully under the protection of the police at their respective locations.

“Since Bersih 2.0, the Malaysian government has commendably responded by setting up a Parliamentary Select Committee which has come up with 22 recommendations for electoral reforms,

most of which have to be responded to by the Electoral Commission (EC).

“However in that same period, we have witnessed the total inability of the EC to address the fundamental issue of cleansing the electoral roll, which is mired with irregularities.

“At present, the Malaysian government has given the undertaking that they will not crack down on the main Bersih 3.0 sit-down rally to be held in Kuala Lumpur. However, there is some disagreement with the venue chosen, Independence Square (Dataran Merdeka) in Kuala Lumpur. We will have to wait on how this will play out in the coming days ahead.”

Student protests

Since July 14, students demanding free education and protesting the government’s education loan system have been peacefully occupying Independence Square.

Several tents have been set up, tapping into the symbolism of the global Occupy movement. [Student activists say they will stay there to welcome the Bersih 3.0 protesters on April 28.](#)

However in the early hours of the morning of April 19 [a group of 50-70 thugs attacked the students’ camp,](#) smashed up their tents and destroyed some of their equipment.

At first, nearby police allowed the attack to proceed. They intervened later only after students demanded they act against this criminal activity.

Meanwhile, the right-wing Perkasa militia group (which the BN government allows to operate as a counterforce to the democratic and progressive movements) has threatened to hold a counter-rally at Independence Square on April 29. However, a similar right-wing counter-protest to Bersih 2.0 drew very small numbers last year.

P.S.

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