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## **Public Demonstrations in Malaysia: The Government Bites Back**

**Ooi Kee Beng**  
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A common complaint about Malaysian politics is that there is way too much of it. Wherever one turns, whichever way one looks, and no matter how technical the issue was to start with, one can be sure that politics has managed to creep into the picture.

Where the nation-building project is concerned, this state of affairs tends to decelerate development, and in the regional context, leads one to reinforce the opinion that Malaysia is losing the broad economic edge that it had enjoyed.

In fact, for a country without an ideology, the depth to which daily life in Malaysia has been politicised is dumbfounding – until one remembers that the issue of Malay rights, accompanied by a steady process of Islamisation, could not but have over the decades configured all major decision-making processes.

It is therefore all the more amazing that the current administration under Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, heir to this veritable tradition of sophisticated statecraft, should be handling the present spate of public demonstrations in the capital of Kuala Lumpur in such a clumsy manner. One consequence of the over-politicisation of society is that conspiracy theories flourish. They multiply when openness on the part of the authorities and other parties concerned is lacking. Concealment of details and facts is after all the lifeblood of the politically addicted.

However, in the present situation, unless one is an incurable conspiracy junkie, it is hard put to distinguish any cleverness and subtlety behind the harsh measures adopted by the authorities against protesters since the massive march on 10 November, organised by the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih), and carried out by approximately 30,000 Malaysians of all races, calling for electoral reforms.

In quick succession since then, three more shows of protest and frustration have taken place. The Hindu march of 25 November, organised by the Hindu Rights Action Force

(Hindraf) and boasting anything from 10,000 to 30,000 participants, succeeded in drawing international and national attention to the plight of the Indian poor, despite being banned by a unique court order obtained by the police; the Human Rights Day celebrations march on 9 December was cancelled in the face of official threats and in consideration of the heightened tension in the capital; and the aborted gathering on 11 December outside Parliament House to protest against a constitutional amendment aimed at retaining the controversial head of the Election Commission, Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman.

Despite protest organisers being out early and widely advertising their events through the Internet, the government decided nevertheless to ban all of them, and in some cases, on the day before the scheduled protests. That was tantamount to asking for trouble. It did not help that PM Abdullah chose to be uncharacteristically aggressive when closing the general assembly of his dominant party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), on 9 November, by declaring that he would not be challenged.

The next day, over 30,000 Malaysians turned up on the streets of the capital to do just that. Despite some use of chemical-laced water and tear gas, the demonstrators nevertheless managed to do what they had set out to do, namely hand over a memorandum to the paramount King of Malaysia. Nothing was therefore gained from the ban except a shameful show of police muscle.

What was lost was arguably more of the hope that Malaysians had had in Abdullah Badawi's administration. Roadblocks were used in all cases to prevent citizens of the capital and beyond from congregating at designated spots. This meant that racial profiling had to be carried out where the Hindu protest was concerned. Bad jams were caused at key junctions and major roads, and meant that the protests often became more widespread than originally planned.

Between threats that it would not hesitate to use the infamous and draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) that permits detention without trial against the protesters, the government allowed a selected numbers of demonstrators to be arrested and charged in court. Seventeen were charged with illegal assembly for the demonstration of 10 November. All pleaded not guilty. For the Hindraf demonstration, 31 were brought before a judge, and 26 of them were charged with the attempted murder of a police officer. The government's latest move, one that will see Abdullah's popularity drop to its lowest level ever, was to detain five leaders of the movement for two years without trial on 13 December.

Twenty nine protesters were detained for several hours on 11 December. The fact that this took place outside Parliament House damages further the international reputation of the Abdullah administration, which had been faring badly over the last few weeks. In the event, the arrests prompted all 16 opposition members of parliament to boycott proceedings, and the constitutional amendment extending the election commissioner's appointment was passed unanimously.

This use of force outside parliament, done with no show of discomfort or disagreement from government MPs, helped bury any illusion that the Malaysian parliament still enjoyed any freedom outside of central government sanction. More street protests are expected in the near future. Toll hikes in the Klang Valley, always a contentious issue that affects most people living there, alongside a rise in the price of petrol due to a continuation of serial cuts in government subsidies, are bound to fire emotions and force more Malaysian citizens to take to the streets.

To these are now added all the court appearances that protesters and their leaders will be making, each of which can be used as an occasion for further shows of restlessness and disgruntlement by their growing numbers of supporters.

With general elections likely to be around the corner, the government may have to pay where it hurts most for its inferior statecraft, its refusal to listen to sounds of discontent, its dismal sense of strategy, its lack of political imagination, and perhaps most damagingly, its palpable arrogance.

*Ooi Kee Beng is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. He is the author of, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and his Time* (ISEAS, 2006).*

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