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MALAYSIA'S OPPOSITION

Marching to a new tactic

By Ooi Kee Beng

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A RUDE shock awaited Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi last Saturday, a day after the 58th annual general assembly of his party, the dominant United Malays National Organisation (Umno), ended.

Throughout the congress, he had managed to achieve the show of unity he had hoped for and the usual provocative speeches at these meetings were toned down, in line with his wishes. He had walked the tight rope between being party president and Premier rather well.

Then came a big misjudgment: he gladly received the Malaysian flag taken into space by Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor Sheikh Mustapha as a present for Umno, rather than for the nation as a whole.

But a bigger blunder was when the government refused to permit a demonstration planned for last Saturday by *Bersih*, a coalition of 64 NGOs and five political parties, calling for "clean and fair elections". Datuk Seri Abdullah stated in uncharacteristically harsh words that he would not be challenged.

The coalition had planned for a group of leaders, led by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, to walk to the palace of Malaysia's paramount king, the Agong, and there hand over a memorandum pleading for electoral reforms.

Bersih, which had said it expected 100,000 people to turn up for the march, later proclaimed it would go ahead with it despite the ban. This led the police to set up

checkpoints at various entrances to the capital city in the early morning to limit the crowd.

Despite police hindrances, about 50,000 people managed to take part in the protest in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. There were some arrests, and water cannon were used against the crowd at one point.

The protest was clearly well planned, with marchers dressed in yellow – the royal colour – and rubbish was picked up after the event.

Datuk Seri Anwar handed over the memorandum and Bersih declared the demonstration a big success. More such displays of dissatisfaction are being planned, it said.

It may be argued that the opposition has, through the events, finally found a plausible tactic with which to challenge the hegemony of the ruling Barisan Nasional. But the scale of the demonstration directly reflects the pent-up dissatisfaction that Malaysians have been feeling over the past two years.

Warnings were issued by many at the start of the Abdullah administration that the Premier might be making too many promises and the disappointment that Malaysians would feel would be all the greater if he failed to keep his word.

But even taking into account the Prime Minister's excessive promises, there was still disbelief over the government's apparent oblivion to the spreading dissatisfaction. Datuk Seri Abdullah had been appearing less and less conscious about the deteriorating standard of governance under his mandate.

This sense of being ignored finally pushed dissenting voices to shift their calls for a fight against graft to calls for electoral reforms instead.

With the failure of the opposition parties to perform well in recent by-elections, the realisation began spreading that the government - however incompetent - was well-entrenched and that the chances for reforms were minuscule.

The shift in focus from corruption to electoral reforms is also significant because it expresses a loss of faith in the willingness and ability of the Abdullah administration to handle corruption.

The logic is that if the government will not fight corruption, then it has to go; but for it to be challenged in any way, the electoral system must be changed. As it now stands, the system is tilted in favour of the ruling coalition.

Also of great significance is that Datuk Seri Anwar has again become a force to be reckoned with. On hindsight, banning last Saturday's protest played straight into the hands of the opposition. The ban accomplished nothing and, worse, it made the police look powerless despite their show of force.

Opposition forces have now found an effective tactic in the run-up to elections and will no doubt be using it often. The call for electoral reforms is an issue that they can all agree upon.

But for the tactic to succeed, the opposition must maintain the notion that the movement is bigger than party politics and that it is seeking reforms for the good of the country as a whole.

In today's context, the royals are the symbol of non-partisan politics and the appeal to them highlights that point. The symbolism now functions as the expression of non-racial Malaysian-ness or, at least, non-Umno Malaysian-ness.

After last weekend's march, Bersih will want to keep up the momentum until a general election is called. There are eight other sultans it can appeal to in a symbolic bid to seek help for electoral reforms.

Datuk Seri Abdullah has indeed been challenged. What will be his next move? For the time being, the government is not expected to do very much about the march. It has praised the police for doing a good job and will therefore leave things be, at least until the next protest.

That second march will be the crucial one. How the government reacts then will decide the future of the movement and of politics in Malaysia in general.

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