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Protests in Malaysia: Consensus politics taks a hammering

By Ooi Kee Beng

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THE demonstration in Kuala Lumpur on Nov 25 by supporters of the Hindu Rights Action Front (Hindraf) was momentous in more ways than meet the eye.

Indeed, it struck at the very heart of the Malaysian political system. The show of force by the government testified to this, with police blocks at major roads leading into Kuala Lumpur days before the protest.

What we are seeing is the long-suppressed dissatisfaction felt by members of one of Malaysia's major non-bumiputera ethnic groups.

Hoping against hope, Malaysian Indians had continued to be nominally represented by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), a party generally seen to be riddled with corruption, and to be overly compliant with government wishes.

Those who held a running battle against the riot police for six hours on Nov 25 had finally given up hope. The authorities had banned the demonstration, claiming it would harm the reputation of the country and threaten the inter-racial stand-off that the present system is built upon.

The demonstrators were not only Malaysian Indians, they were significantly Hindus. This separates them from those Indians who are Muslims or followers of other religions, and highlights the plight of citizens who are neither privileged bumiputeras nor favoured Muslims.

Basically, they came from the largest Indian sub-group in multiracial Malaysia, and up till now were generally thought of as incorrigibly do-cile and politically passive. Unlike in earlier demonstrations, participants in this rally were members of the poverty-stricken class, the unprivileged, the unpreferred and the unaffirmed.

Even at the time of their forefathers' arrival in the British Malay colonies in the 150 years before independence, they had formed the underclass in the colonial economy. They came as indentured labour to work on the plantations and mines, and to join the lower ranks of the civil service.

Their poignant claim today is that independence has failed them, just as the British colonialists did.

The petition they wished to hand over to Britain's Queen Elizabeth on the very weekend that the Commonwealth nations were meeting in Uganda was an indictment of the post-colonial government for its failure to better their living conditions as citizens of an independent nation. It amounted to a declaration that Malaysia's system of race-based parties has, since independence, been working to their disadvantage as a group.

Six hours after the banned protest started, the police finally gave in and decided to allow the demonstrators to hand over their petition to the British High Commission.

They realised what the government should have known from the start - that the best way to handle a well-organised and widely supported rally is to allow it.

But the protesters refused the grudging offer and said they now preferred to file their complaint with the Queen in London.

Hindraf's strategy, though born of deep desperation, is cleverly thought out and holds great potential for embarrassing the government.

The movement is seeking international attention and assistance in stopping what it sees as a systematic discrimination of the 1.8 million Indians in Malaysia.

Recent figures show the demonstrators have a strong case. The life-span of the Indian male is now shorter than that of other male Malaysians. Unemployment is very high among Indians. Changes in the economics of the plantation industry have destroyed the traditional socio-economic structure of their settlements, turning many Indians into slum-dwellers in big cities.

Part and parcel of this displacement was the demolition of their temples, which are suddenly deemed to have been illegally erected. These have been bulldozed, often without any attempts to explain why or seek the understanding of worshippers or to provide replacement temples.

Also, recent cases involving tensions between Hindus and Muslims have not been conducive to inter-faith understanding.

By bringing the former colonial masters into the picture, Hindraf is also taking the Malay Agenda of the government to its extreme conclusion, which is that non-Malays with no material means lack a future in Malaysia.

At the same time, the authorities, by banning the rally and relying on police force and intimidation to subdue protesters, as they had done with the larger Bersih demonstrations on Nov 10 to call for electoral reforms, showed a startling lack of understanding of the groundswell of discontent that had been growing over the past few years.

By outlawing such rallies, the government has provided more reason for protesters to air their grievances in public.

The general election is due to be called any time next year, and the anger and atmosphere of conflict that had been so powerfully expressed throughout last month are bound to work against the ruling coalition.

The onus is now on the MIC. It can choose to intimidate the discontented or it can appease them by acting like the champion of the Indian community that it once set out to be.

On the one hand, it will come under pressure from other members of the ruling coalition, especially Umno, to manage its community, and on the other, its own supporter base will be pushing harder for government measures to help them as a group.

What the government will be fearing is that the MIC will overly succumb to the pressure from below, and thus undermine the skewered 'spirit of consensus' within the ruling coalition right before the general election.

An atmosphere of confrontation within the Barisan Nasional is the last thing it needs.

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