

PERSPECTIVE

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Bersih 5 and the Growing Discontent among the Malays

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- More than 50,000 people took part in the Bersih 5 demonstration in Kuala Lumpur on 19 November 2016 calling for fair and clean elections. This was despite threats of violence by an opposing group, the arrest of some of the Bersih movement's key leaders and the blocking of road access by the police.
- More significantly, the demonstration showed visibly increased participation by Malays, many of whom were youths. Some of these may have been mobilized or inspired by the Tangkap MO1 (Arrest Malaysian Official 1) rally held in August, organized by university students. Others may have been left-leaning Malay activists.
- Factors crucial to the general elections include, the support of Malay youth, for which social media may be an important battleground; the support of rural Malays, where counteracting UMNO's rural patronage and money politics will be a major challenge for the opposition, and; the presence of strong and efficient Malay leadership among the opposition parties in all the states.
- Much will also depend on the ability of the new opposition parties—Bersatu and Amanah—to swing the support of anti-Najib UMNO members and anti-Hadi PAS followers towards them. It will also rely on the ability of various opposition parties to ensure straight fights in the coming general elections.

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INTRODUCTION

Threats of violence by the anti-Bersih red shirts, as well as the political fatigue of many Malaysians after the racialization of Bersih 4 following the low Malay turnout at that rally last year, had led many observers to expect an unenthusiastic level of public participation in Bersih 5.

On the eve of Bersih 5, key leaders of Bersih and opposition parties were arrested. The police also blocked most of the road access to the gathering points for the rally. Despite these obstacles, however, more than 50,000 people turned up to march the streets in downtown Kuala Lumpur on 19 November 2016 to demand fair and clean elections.

Even though the overall turnout was lower than the strong crowd at Bersih 4 which was estimated at more than 100,000 participants, Malay participation in Bersih 5 was notably higher, despite various attempts by the ruling UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and its affiliated NGOs to racialize dissident movements.

The expressed agenda of Bersih is for elections in Malaysia to be fair and clean. The situation is paradoxical though, since there is unlikely to be significant electoral reform without a change of government, and at the same time, a change in government is difficult without fair elections. Hence, in many ways, the quest for electoral reform overlaps with the support enjoyed by the opposition parties. This explains why despite being independent of any political party, Bersih maintains close interactions with opposition parties that support its causes.

This article focuses on the mobilization and participation of ethnic Malays in Bersih 5, based on the authors' observations and conversations with various group representatives and ordinary participants at the rally. In concentrating on Malay participation, the authors do not intend to discredit the involvement of other ethnic groups, including Chinese, Indians and Orang Asli. Besides ethnic composition, the gender and the class affiliation of the participants also deserve attention.

Observations (Hew Wai Weng)

At 10 am, Wai Weng joined the crowd at Masjid Negara, the National Mosque. At its peak, there were about 6,000 people present, and half of them were Malays. Many of the Malays who were gathered there were mobilised by political parties such as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party) and Parti Amanah Negara (National Trust Party, a party newly formed by progressives who had recently left PAS, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), as well as Islamic-based NGOs such as IKRAM (Malaysian IKRAM Association) and ABIM (the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia).

As the crowd marched from Masjid Negara to Masjid Jamek, a mosque close to Dataran Merdeka (Merdeka Square), more joined along the way. In the beginning, the participants were quite ethnically mixed. But that changed once they marched through the Pudu area. At

the same time, thousands of spectators and protesters, many of them young Chinese, stood on both sides of the street, clapping hands and cheering when the protesters paraded through.

The rally soon turned into a carnival-like event. At the same time, the ethnic composition changed – although Malay participants were increasing, its composition dropped perhaps to about 30 per cent. There were about 20,000 people near Dataran Merdeka.

As the protesters walked from Masjid Jamek to KLCC (Kuala Lumpur Convention Center, where Petronas Twin Tower is located), increasing numbers of young Malays joined the crowd. At KLCC, the final gathering point of Bersih 5, the crowd appeared more ethnically-mixed, with an estimation about 40 percent Malay among the participants.

Observations (Maszlee Malik)

Maszlee started his observation from Masjid Jamek LRT station, at around noon. Between the LRT station and Dataran Merdeka and Puduraya, the crowd was mixed, with a slight majority of young Chinese participants. Most of the protestors consisted of individuals rather than mobilized groups. However, groups of women belonging to IKRAM and AMANAH could be seen convening near Dataran Maybank with their Medical aid team made up mostly of medical doctors and health workers. Groups of lawyers belonging to Pakatan Harapan (The Hope's Pact, consisting of Keadilan, Amanah and DAP) and NGOs could be seen amongst the crowd.

When the group from Masjid Negara arrived, the crowd became more mixed. Louder applause was heard when Orang Asli groups appeared. Compared to previous Bersih rallies, the appearance of Orang Asli was much larger this time around. After 2 pm, more young Malays could be seen along the streets near Puduraya, some of whom were wearing black T-shirts. Most of them conversed in the Kelantanese dialect, and the appeared uneasy in being among the other protestors. They mentioned that they belonged to Malay-based groups supporting former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and other ex-UMNO leaders in the rally.

Since access to Dataran Merdeka was denied, Bersih 5 organizers instructed protestors to gather at KLCC. The crowd moving pass Pasar Seni (Central Market) were made up mostly of Malays, moving leisurely towards KLCC.

MOBILIZATION AND PARTICIPATION

Generally, more than 20,000 Malays attended Bersih 5. Although the number is lower than at Bersih 2 and 3 (approximately 30,000-40,000) when the Islamist party PAS was supportive of Bersih and had mobilised its supporters, it is still an impressive figure. It showed that it is still possible to mobilise Malay Muslims to join rallies without PAS endorsement. The purple-shirted security team, mainly consisting of ARiF of Amanah, Skuad Angkatan Muda Keadilan (Keadilan Youth Squad), Unit Tindakan Khas of DAP

(DAP Special Task Unit) and ANSAR of IKRAM youth, have also effectively replaced Unit Amal of PAS in enforcing security and safety at this rally.

How were these Malays being mobilized? Both Keadilan and Amanah were strongly committed to mobilising their members and supporters, including arranging many buses coming from states such as Selangor, Kelantan, Johor, Kedah and Perak. Both parties had also helped in the pre-Bersih convoys that visited many rural and semi-urban districts. These efforts may have encouraged more Malays to join Bersih 5. Where Amanah is concerned, Bersih 5 is a venue for them to prove their relevance in the national political landscape and their ability to replace PAS. In addition, a few PAS leaders with their supporters were present at Bersih 5, in defiance of the party's instruction. There were also PAS supporters from Selangor, Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah who attended without the endorsement of their party.

Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had openly urged Malaysians to join Bersih, and his newly-formed political party, Bersatu, had mobilised some ex-UMNO supporters to join the rally. Mahathir himself had rushed back from a visit to Sudan in order to be present at the rally. His presence, together with the strong Malay turnout may help to convince anti-Najib UMNO supporters to leave UMNO or at least to vote against UMNO in the coming elections.

Besides mobilization by political parties, Muslim NGOs, especially IKRAM and ABIM, also fully supported the rally. Leaders of IKRAM said that thousands of IKRAM members joined the rally. PAS being officially absent, IKRAM and ABIM filled the gap in persuading religious Malays to join the protest, and support Amanah, Keadilan and Bersatu.

Days before Bersih 5, the president of PAS Hadi Awang had snubbed the movement and likened it to the Arab Spring which according to him, had turned some countries in the Middle East towards chaos. Supporters of Hadi Awang had also made statements on social media, linking the rally to foreign-funded and liberal movements. Some Muslim organisations such as ISMA (Malaysian Muslim Solidarity) associated the rally with 'Christianization' and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) activism, through their cyber troopers. Similarly, some figures associated with the religious authorities of different states issued statements condemning the rally as 'un-Islamic' and accused the Bersih rally of aiming to bring down a legitimate Muslim government. To indirectly debunk such claims, some ABIM members carried at the Bersih 5 rally, a banner displaying the photo of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the chairman of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, together with a quotation by him which endorsed democracy, the right of a people to choose their government, and the right to change it if it is corrupted.

DISCONTENTS

At Islamic-related events and seminars attend a few days before the Bersih 5, it was noticed that there were grievances among Islamic-oriented activists against Hadi-led PAS. Some of them were unhappy with Hadi's perceived pro-UMNO stand, as well as his confrontational

manners towards his opponents. Although many in principle supported the implementation of Hudud, they were dissatisfied with how PAS manipulated the issue for political gain. They were disappointed that PAS had projected a bad image of Islam among non-Muslims and reduced the encompassing struggle of Islamic activism to merely mean the enforcement of Hudud.

In addition, it is noteworthy that there were many young Malays present at Bersih 5. Some may have been mobilized or inspired by the Tangkap MO1 (Arrest Malaysian Official 1) rally organized by university students in August. Others were left-leaning Malay activists. There were also a small but increasing number of Malays, especially youths, who joined Bersih on their own. For example, a few young Malay girls said: 'We are not members of any political party or NGO. We come by ourselves to show our supports for Bersih'.

Bersih 5 committee members, as well as leaders of Amanah, IKRAM, ABIM and Islamic-oriented student leaders from different universities in the Klang Valley have been interviewed about their mobilization strategies. Amanah leaders considered the rally very significant for them to prove to the public that they can replace PAS in mobilising Malays to join rallies. The Johor branch of Amanah arranged for buses to ferry participants to the rally. Conversations with some of these participants revealed that they were not all Amanah members, and some of them were in fact UMNO members who were frustrated with the current leadership. IKRAM and ABIM on the other hand had fully utilized their internal communication mechanism to bring most of their members to the rally, not only as participants, but also as medical officers, lawyers, security team members and waste management team members to ensure the cleanliness of the venue during and after the rally.

Unlike the Chinese, the Malay protesters seemed to have been mobilized through political parties and NGOs. Beginning from Bersih 2, and becoming more prevalent in Bersih 3, 4 and 5, most Chinese rally-goers had little commitment to any formal political and social activism. Instead they are ordinary citizens who had organized themselves, mainly through social media, to join the rally.

A middle-aged Grab-taxi Malay driver noted to the authors that, 'Because of Najib, many of us have to suffer. I could not join Bersih, because I have to work more to make ends meet. I will morally support the causes of Bersih'. Does his view represent the silent majority? Will increasing discontent towards Hadi-led PAS and Najib-led UMNO translate into votes against both UMNO and PAS in the elections?

CONCLUSION

The increased Malay participation in Bersih 5 does not necessarily mean that the situation faced by the opposition are any less challenging. A few days right after Bersih 5, the Barisan National government has paved the way in Parliament for Hadi Awang to table his controversial motion again to enhance the 1965 Shariah Court (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act, which many perceive as a move to undermine Malay support for Amanah and Keadilan.

Bersih leader Maria Chin Abdullah was detained for several days under Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA), while political cartoonist Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque (Zunar) was arrested for sedition for holding an exhibition on cartoons that allegedly insulted Najib. The Najib government is likely to continue focusing on religious and racial issues and using repressive laws against dissidents.

A few factors will be crucial in the coming elections: first, the support of Malay youth, for which social media may be an important battleground; second, the support of rural Malays, where counteracting UMNO's rural patronage and money politics will be a major challenge for the opposition; third, the presence of strong and efficient Malay leadership of the opposition parties in all the states. The latter is important for debunking UMNO's allegation that the DAP (Democratic Action Party) or the Chinese will dominate if UMNO loses power.

Malay support for a change in government will also depend on the ability of opposition parties, especially Bersatu and Amanah, to swing the support of anti-Najib UMNO members and anti-Hadi PAS followers towards them. It will also rely on the ability of various opposition parties to ensure straight fights in the coming general elections.

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