

Protest crackdown draws human rights criticism
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Malaysia's crackdown on activists planning to stage a large rally for electoral reform has drawn uncomfortable attention to its human rights practices.

Local and international rights groups have described the crackdown as a "dark day for human rights" in Malaysia.

"The right of citizens within a democratic society should be respected by all parties, especially the state," the Kuala Lumpur-based Association for the Promotion of Human Rights said.

The group urged Prime Minister Najib Razak to provide "strong political leadership in bringing about a win-win situation for human rights and community harmony."

Election reform coalition Bersih said it would hold a peaceful street demonstration tomorrow protesting what it calls unfair election laws.

Organisers have insisted on going ahead with the march, saying it was in line with their right to peaceful assembly as enshrined in the constitution.

However, Najib defended the harsh crackdown, saying the rally was illegal and would cause disruptions to public order besides affecting the livelihood of businesses within the city.

Whispers of violent clashes between authorities and demonstrators have created a highly tense political atmosphere throughout the country, where the government has long been criticised for being intolerant of its detractors.

The demonstrators are calling for an overhaul of electoral laws ahead of general elections, which are due in 2013 but which many observers said they believe would be called by the end of this year.

The protesters have demanded more transparent procedures for ballot counting, equal access to media for all political parties and other changes to the electoral system, which they say puts the opposition at a disadvantage.

The government maintained that current laws are fair.

Bersih version 2.0

In 2007, Bersih organisers held a similar protest. Tens of thousands of people donned yellow shirts and took to the streets in the largest street rally in decades.

Critics said the authorities' heavy hand against organisers this time around is a reflection of their fear of public discontent.

"Only those who are afraid will arrest people wearing T-shirts," prominent activist Marina Mahathir, daughter of former premier Mahathir, said in reference to the recent arrests as well as seizures of T-shirts.

Even Malaysians previously uninterested in the organisers' cause have now taken stock of the unfolding events with a mixture of disbelief and anger.

"I'm really disappointed with how the government is handling this whole thing," said Jek Tan, general manager of a digital advertising agency in Kuala Lumpur.

"Freedom in Malaysia has now been downgraded to whatever the government says it is," Tan said.

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