

## **Rebranding Rela into BN's vanguard**

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**Bob Teoh**

Under the government's transformation programme (GTP) Rela is to be rebranded as part of a police "omnipresence." But its massive build-up has raised suspicions that it may instead become Barisan Nasional's vanguard or even an additional vote bank.

"When the chips are down, Rela will be with this government to defend the country.

"Do not cause havoc in this country because the 2.8 million Rela members will not stand idly by and watch the country descend into chaos," he thundered to the noisy approval from a crowd of 30,000 Rela members gathered in Kuala Lumpur last Saturday.

rela members 241204Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak seems at variance with his transformation minister Idris Jala. The GTP roadmap for combatting crime requires Rela to help police keep the "omnipresence" in 50 identified crime hot spots in the Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor and Penang.

But Najib talks about using Rela as a vanguard or vigilante when Umno or BN's chips are down and he wants Rela to contain demonstrators out to create public disorder.

How do we expect a rag-tag army of volunteers to rein in demonstrators when even the specially trained red-helmeted FRU could not handle the peaceful Bersih 2.0 rally last year without resorting to brutality?

And Bersih 2.0 was not even out to create public disorder at that.

There is hardly any time nor resources to train the volunteer army.

According to the GTP roadmap, less than 400 Rela/JPAM personnel were trained and deployed in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor in August and September 2009; about 280 personnel were trained and were deployed in Penang and Johor in October and November 2009.

That's a tiny drop in the ocean of 2.8 million Rela volunteers. If it takes just 10 hours to train one Rela member, it would take 3,240 man-years to train all of them round the clock! What we are likely to get is a largely untrained but a vigilante force sanctioned by BN.

Massive build-up seems strange

The recruitment of volunteers for this auxiliary security force shot up almost five-fold from 600,000 to the current 2.8 million within two years. It is the biggest peace time civilian mobilisation and is 25 times bigger than the country's standing army as well as that of the police force.

The bulk of the new Rela recruits are from frontline states. Selangor has half a million, Penang (220,328), Kelantan (222,910), Perak (271,396), Sabah (258,162) and Sarawak (199,991) as at July 31, 2011. This works out to be two thirds of Rela's total membership.

Given that in the 2008 election, some marginal seats were won or lost by less than 50 votes, the extraordinary Rela presence in these states is more than a concern.

This massive build-up seems extraordinarily strange, especially when Malaysia already has a better police personnel to population ratio than even industrial countries. For every 100,000 persons, Malaysia has 301 policemen.

According to UN criminal justice statistics, this is higher than Denmark (196), Canada (200), South Korea

(202), Japan (203), Sweden (206), the US (229) and Australia (247).

refugee arrested by rela officers 200608 On top of this, the country also has its civil defence force of 67,000 as well as the Police Volunteer Corp, both of which are much more disciplined and experienced than Rela.

Rela has a bad reputation, having drawn flak from foreign attention for its human rights abuses of nabbing aliens without valid entry permits for a bounty of RM80 per head captured. In 2007, Human Rights Watch called for Rela to be disbanded.

Call for repeal of legislation

“The government has set up what’s little more than a vigilante force to target foreigners. Given Rela’s repeated abuses, it should be disbanded right away,” said Brad Adams, its Asia director.

In that same year the Malaysian Bar Council passed a resolution at its annual general meeting, calling for the repeal of the legislation that established Rela and extended the powers of Rela officers to, amongst other things, enforce immigration law.

Rela (Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia) or the Peoples’ Volunteer Alliance was established on Jan 11, 1972, under the (Essential Powers) Emergency Act 1964 - Essential Rules (Ikatan Relawan Rakyat) (Amendment) 2005.

This law presumably will be defunct within six months after the repeal of the emergency declarations by parliament last September and is to be replaced by what Najib calls a new Rela Act presumably in March. But he has given no details.

Another worrisome sign is that the home ministry has recently installed a RM6.65 million high-tech virtual shooting range for Rela cadets or teenagers to handle simulation firearms.

The centre at the Rakan Muda Complex in Kuala Lumpur can cater to up to 14,400 trainees a year. The virtual firing range will run on South Korea’s Intelligent Marksmanship Training Simulation System (IMTS) for its police force.

Added to this is the claim by Perkasa, the extreme Malay right wing group, that a Rela subgroup called Briged Setia Negara had been established by Selangor Perkasa chief, Abdullah Mansor, in December last year. This was later denied by Rela.

Rela is also a strain on the home ministry budget as it would cost millions to maintain such a big and superfluous outfit.

Najib has also proposed to increase Rela allowance by RM2 per hour. This will effectively double the full time volunteer allowance for non-officers to between RM800 and RM900 a month, which is more than what a village headman or longhouse tuai rumah gets.

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