

Low turnout at Anwar's event due to 'directive'?

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Malaysiakini had noticed that there was a relatively low turnout of supporters - fewer than 300 - at Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's event in Penang's Little India on Mar 8.

According to state Pakatan Rakyat leaders, the lack of support could have been due to a directive asking traders to "boycott" the event in the touristic and cultural area.

Penang municipal councillor Prem L Anand agreed that there was a noticeable absence of traders who would usually show up for events involving political leaders - either from BN or Pakatan.

"The directive also said that garlands were not to be placed on Anwar during his walkabout," he told Malaysiakini, when met after the one-hour event, which ended at 7.30pm.

"This is not fair as traders are supposed to be neutral," said the DAP member.

"Many traders attended Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's visit to Penang during the Chinese New Year celebration at Weld Quay, and garlanded him," he added.

No official directive

Anwar's two-day visit in Penang, included a fundraising dinner in Bayan Baru, after Little India, a ceramah in Alor Pongsu (Tasek Gelugor), and a talk on Asean Democracy and Economic Development in the island the next day, with Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng and Bangkok Governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra.

Guests and journalists were told to be at the venue at 4.30pm but the event with the Indian community was delayed for two hours, to the annoyance of many.

Anwar, who walked about 0.5km, from Pitt Street to the event venue with about 150 supporters, later 'entertained' the crowd when he spoke to them.

When contacted, Penang Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry president N Vasantharajan denied that the chamber had issued any such directive to the traders.

He maintained that the chamber was neutral, and that it worked together with the state and federal government of the day.

He added that the chamber was an independent NGO and did not interfere in the political preferences of its members.

"Politics is personal. No one can force a person to support another," he said when asked if the chamber had directed its members not to garland Anwar.

Vasantharajan said chamber members and traders have both given Guan Eng (right) and BN leaders who visited Little India hearty welcomes.

"The chief minister came to Little India during the Deepavali festival in the pouring rain. Yet we all came out to greet him and put 60 garlands on him that day," he added.

Chamber supports gov't of the day

Vasantharajan said that the chamber cooperates with the state government and sits in the Little India

committee chaired by state executive councillor and Tanjung MP Chow Kon Yeow.

"People should not blame the chamber for the low turnout at Anwar's event, " he said.

"I take pride in my work and I also take responsibility if something goes wrong. Don't blame others for your failure," he told Pakatan leaders.

Event organiser, PKR Batu Uban assemblyperson S Raveentharan clarified that Anwar received less garlands as he only walked along one road to the ceramah area.

Raveentharan said that the organisers wanted to avoid traffic congestion as the event started at 6.30pm, when workers are heading home.

"There was also someone who said that he would come to the event holding a black flag. Also I heard people were told not to garland Anwar," Raveentharan said.

"These threatening tactics and hitting people below the belt is not acceptable," added the state PKR vice-chief.

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