

Fears of phantom voters and fraud in GE
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By Julia Zappei, AFP

Ng Yuen Chan has occupied the same room for 20 years, so the retiree was surprised to learn recently that he had two Indian Malaysian women as roommates.

They were phantom voters registered at his home in Seremban, capital of Negri Sembilan, a key political battleground state and one of many such cases fuelling fear of possible fraud in coming elections in the multi-racial country.

"The government should take action. These people don't exist here," Ng said angrily.

Opposition election workers and independent vote-reform advocates say a rash of irregularities could tip the balance in what may be a tight contest between the long-ruling BN coalition and an upstart opposition.

ambiga question by police over seksualiti merdeka 071111 1Campaigners warn that if the government does not address the issue, they could take to the streets again as they did in a protest by tens of thousands last year that was crushed by police.

"I certainly think the playing field is still very skewed. It could cost the opposition the win," said Ambiga Sreenivasan (right), co-chair of electoral reform group Bersih 2.0.

"If they (the government) don't commit to reform before the... election, there will be a Bersih 3.0 rally."

Bersih 2.0 and other critics allege the coalition, despite promising reform, is illegally registering non-resident supporters in shaky constituencies or those held by opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's three-party alliance.

In one case near Ng's house, more than 60 people were registered living in two apartment blocks that do not even exist, say opposition activists who have been scouring quarterly voter rolls compiled by the Election Commission.

The government denies a fraud campaign, and the commission says it is cleaning voter rolls.

Late last year it purged more than 40,000 names that could not be accounted for, but the revelation only added to fears of widespread irregularities.

The commission also recently fired hundreds of staff after it was found they were responsible for registering voters twice, adding non-citizens, and other "negligence," government-controlled media reported.

Electoral roll a fundamental issue

NONEAnthony Loke (right), an opposition parliamentarian representing Ng's district, said a report by a government-appointed organisation found some 80,000 people were registered in just over 300 addresses, among other discrepancies.

"The most fundamental issue is the electoral roll. It must be cleaned up," he said. "If they don't clean up the roll, other changes are not as significant."

Bersih 2.0 and opposition parties led a rally in Kuala Lumpur last July to demand clean elections - 'Bersih' means clean - and were met by tear gas and water cannon. Some 1,600 people were arrested.

The rally gave voice to widespread suspicions documented in many cases over the years that the ruling coalition has routinely used fraud, vote-buying and a stranglehold on traditional media to stay in power.

bersih 2 rally guy fawkes mask 090711Stung by condemnation over the rally crackdown, Prime Minister Najib Razak set up a bi-partisan parliamentary panel in October to study possible reforms. A final report is due on Monday.

An interim report suggested measures including introducing indelible ink to prevent multiple voting, which the Election Commission has pledged to do.

"The main (recommendations) are all accepted and done already. Now we are busy doing the preparations," commission deputy chairperson Wan Ahmad Wan Omar told AFP.

But critics accuse the government of dragging its feet on far-reaching reform and ignoring calls to halt abuses like alleged vote-buying and preventing fair access to media.

New report on irregularities

Concern has sharpened recently amid heavy speculation that the polls - due by next April - could be called within months.

"You can't expect BN to implement (all the) reforms for a system that has benefitted them for years," said Loke, also a member of the parliamentary reform panel.

In 2008, Anwar's three-party opposition alliance snatched away the BN's long-held two-thirds parliamentary majority and now holds four of Malaysia's 13 states, its highest ever number.

Bersih 2.0 has calculated the BN coalition won a parliamentary majority by only 27,000 votes.

NONELeading polling firm Merdeka Centre, along with another institute that monitors the electoral process, will launch a new report on such irregularities on Friday.

Ibrahim Suffian (left), head of the centre, said its research has found an "abnormal increase of voters" in closely contested constituencies.

"So, it will affect the outcome of the election" in some areas, Ibrahim said.

- AFP

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