

Malaysia moves to reform election system

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By John Grafilo, dpa

ANALYSIS Malaysia has taken steps to reform its electoral system, in response to complaints of fraud and manipulation ahead of elections expected this year, but critics say the initiatives are not enough to ensure a fair vote.

NONE“During the last elections there were a lot of complaints about vote-buying, especially in far-flung areas like Sabah and Sarawak,” said Ong Kian Ming (left), a political analyst and lecturer at the University College Sedaya International in Kuala Lumpur.

“There were also a lot of complaints about phantom voters. We have to clean up the electoral roll in order to put an end to the problem of phantom voting.”

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said his ruling National Front coalition does not want to retain power through unfair means and has vowed to continue improving the electoral system.

The National Front has governed Malaysia for 55 years since the predominantly Islamic South-East Asian country gained independence from its British colonisers in 1957.

“We do not want to be elected on the basis of any form of fraud,” said Najib, who succeeded Abdullah Ahmad Badawi after the National Front was nearly toppled by the opposition coalition People’s Alliance in the 2008 elections.

“We want the people to show their support in a fair and clean manner,” he said.

bersih rally petaling street 090711After thousands took to the streets in July calling for clean elections, a nine-member bipartisan parliamentary select committee was established. It has so far made 33 recommendations to the Election Commission (EC).

The commission has adopted several of the proposals, including the marking of voters with indelible ink to prevent multiple voting.

Last Thursday, it adopted six more, including: advance voting for armed forces personnel and police; allowing disabled voters to be accompanied to the ballot by a trusted friend and not just by family members; and allowing Malaysians abroad to vote by post.

EC chief Abdul Aziz Yusof said his office was studying the other recommendations. Some would require amendments to existing laws, and others were beyond the powers of the commission to implement, he said.

Critics said the reforms are insufficient. Activists have called another demonstration for Saturday in central Kuala Lumpur to demand more reforms.

‘Root problems have not been addressed’

Toh Kin Woon, a leader of the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih), said some of the root problems have not been addressed.

“We would like the Election Commission to clean up the electoral roll before conducting the elections,” he said.

“The electoral roll has been an issue of contention for a long time,” he said. “There are problems of voters being registered twice. There are also allegations of voters’ names being moved around without informing the voters themselves.”

azlanAbdul Aziz said the Election Commission does its best to keep the register up to date, but conceded that deleting a voter’s name takes a long time under the present laws.

“In Malaysia, we have about 12.7 million to 12.8 million voters on the electoral roll. We sent the whole list to the National Registration Department to check to make sure the electoral roll is clean,” he said.

Political analyst and lecturer Ong said there could be more than 400,000 dubious names on the register.

He said his research has found at least 938 addresses registered to between 51 and 100 voters each, and 324 addresses showing more than 100 registered voters each. There were also instances of several voters with the same names and birth dates.

Ong said the discrepancies could decide about 35 of 222 federal parliamentary seats in the coming elections, where the winning margin was less than 2,000 votes in the last elections.

“These 35 seats would be enough to determine who gains control of the parliament,” he told dpa.

Vote-buying was also a problem, Ong said. To tackle this, “we need to really educate the people about the importance of their vote”.

He said that while the reforms adopted by the Election Commission would help improve transparency in the system, they fall short of ensuring a fair and clean vote, especially with no clear process to clean up the questionable voters list.

The odds are still stacked against the opposition, Toh said.

“Under this current system, despite its distortion, despite its unfairness, the opposition still has a chance, but this chance has been reduced.”

