

I voted for removal of polling agents, says Khairy
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By Aidila Razak

Rembau MP Khairy Jamaluddin voted in favour of the Election Offences Act Amendment Bill, which was rushed through at the last Parliament sitting, because it still allowed safeguards.

Explaining one of the contentious amendments, Khairy (left) said he voted for the removal of candidates' polling agents from the Election Commission (EC) registration booths because the commission had complained of trouble.

However, polling agents still have room to verify the identities of voters despite the amendments, he told reporters after a debate electoral reform with Bersih co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan in Petaling Jaya last night.

"In the last general election, the polling agents, although I'm not sure from which parties, were telling the EC clerks what to do. They were campaigning and telling voters whom to vote for."

Khairy said polling agents could still set up their own booths 100 metres away from the polling centres and monitor "suspicious voters".

During the debate on electoral reform, the Umno Youth chief reminded Bersih that the Dewan Rakyat did not pass one part of the amendment that would allow the EC to determine when the polling agents could enter the polling centre (usually a classroom).

This, he said, would mean that agents can closely monitor if the person entering the polling centre has been marked with indelible ink.

He explained removing the clause requiring the addresses of the publisher and printer to be printed on election materials does not further encourage dirty politics.

"I have gone through one general election and 20 by-elections and I swear on my life that I've never seen a printer's name on any poster that is defamatory."

However, Khairy did not respond to Ambiga's question on the need for the deletion of the clause if it was so inconsequential.

Baling should be split

Answering a question posed by Bersih steering committee member Wong Chin Huat on gerrymandering, Khairy said breaking up some malapportioned constituencies would bring its own set of problems.

He agreed that rural Baling with over 70,000 voters, some 20,000 more than the Kedah capital Alor Setar, should be split into smaller areas.

But this would mean having to create more constituencies in Sabah and Sarawak, as the agreement when Malaysia was formed was that one-third of the parliamentary constituencies would be located in the Borneo states (and Singapore at that time).

NONEWhile both Khairy and Ambiga (left) had formidable support from different sections of the audience of at least 600, Bersih supporters appeared to monopolise the Q and A session.

Kicking off the session was writer Kee Thuan Chye, who challenged Khairy on his point that voters were

not “transferred” rather they were placed in their correct constituencies when the EC did its border correction exercise.

Khairy had used the example of Selangor Menteri Besar Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, who recently found himself as a Kuala Lumpur voter. He had been a Selangor voter for the past two decades due to his Petaling Jaya voter registration.

“Why then did my friend get transferred from Selangor to Kuala Kangsar (in Perak)?” Kee asked.

Khairy, however, could not provide any answer and quickly jested that this was “new evidence not admissible in court”.

He then derided Bersih for having issues with the map used by EC: “The fact is there must be a border. You don’t believe me, look at Google maps tonight.”

Responding to this, Ambiga said a mapping expert engaged by Bersih also found difficulty mapping out the constituencies as there were several different borders, depending on which map one used.

“By the way, I understand that Tan Sri Khalid is a Petaling Jaya ratepayer,” she said.

Dialogue with EC

Repeatedly returning to Bersih’s distrust of the election commissioners, Khairy said that as a “man of peace” he wanted the NGOs coalition to have a dialogue with the EC and not engage in confrontation.

Insisting that the EC is indefensible, Ambiga agreed to meet with the EC officials in the presence of parliamentarians from BN and Pakatan Rakyat to thrash out electoral issues.

Nevertheless, she pointed out that the reluctance of EC and the government to delay the polls until all issues were resolved “smells disingenuous”.

Ambiga added only two of the parliamentary select committee’s recommendations were specified to take place before the polls.

“Why couldn’t they do it for the rest? In Bangladesh they postponed elections for a year to clean up the electoral roll,” she said.

Sidestepping this, Khairy played to the gallery, saying he was honoured that Ambiga thinks he is the prime minister, as only PM Najib Abdul Razak knows when the election would be held.

He said that as people who “played by the rules” BN would step down peacefully if it loses the general election “just like (BN) handed over Penang, Kedah and Selangor in 2008, Kelantan every election and Perak for a short while”.

“This is way above my pay grade, but I can assure Malaysians that as a coalition in a respected democracy, if we lose, we lose. There is no General Musharaf here...”

“If we lose, God forbid, if we lose,” he added.

