

Ambiga: Bersih kept its promise, but cops didn't
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Bersih 2.0 has denied Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's claims that the movement broke its promise to keep its rally on Saturday peaceful.

In a press release today, Bersih co-chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan said the police had broken their promise of protecting the innocent.

NONE"(Instead, they) turned on us and betrayed the trust of all peace-loving Malaysians," said Ambiga.

She said Bersih had discharged its duties fully and had full control of the rally until the first tear gas was fired, as noted by reported acts of violence.

"Once that happened, the burden shifted to the police to handle the situation that they had created.

"The responsibility became theirs," said Ambiga, in a lengthy three-page statement.

A shared burden

Ambiga, a former Bar Council president, argued that in advanced democracies where freedom of assembly is respected, both organisers and the state have equal responsibility to ensure peace and security.

NONEBut in the case of the rally last Saturday, the state had imposed the entire burden on Bersih.

She said Bersih had done its part by declaring the rally a success and instructions to disperse were issued.

"Bersih 2.0 does not condone the breaching of the barricades and the parties responsible should account to the public for their actions," she said.

However, Ambiga questioned whether the breaching of the barricades at Dataran Merdeka, which triggered the police crackdown, was a justifiable excuse for the "disproportionate and excessive" use of force.

Was it justifiable?

She pointed out that at the time, the majority of participants were already dispersing.

NONE"The police were therefore only justified in taking reasonable measures to push the participants back beyond the barrier," she said.

What was not justifiable was the act of chasing after protesters around Kuala Lumpur, beating them, lobbing tear gas at them and closing down the Masjid Jamek LRT station, said Ambiga.

"The chilling reality is that the brutality shown this year by the police far exceeded the brutality shown last year."

Don't change the subject

Despite all the attention now being directed at the violence seen at the rally, Ambiga said the authorities must not forget that Bersih 3.0 had gathered a 250,000 strong crowd.

(Malaysiakini estimated that the figure was closer to 100,000.)

Ambiga said the crowd gathered for a common purpose - true electoral reforms - for hours under the sun.

NONE" They were the young and the old, Malaysians from different backgrounds. They came from the Klang Valley and from as far away as Sabah and Sarawak.

"They came despite the threats by the government, the lack of transportation and the roadblocks placed in their way. And they were not the only ones.

"Thousands of other Malaysians gathered in Penang, Malacca, Johor, Kuching, Sibul, Miri, Kota Kinabalu and in more than 80 cities around the world.

"These are the true faces of Malaysia. They are a reflection of the true will and aspirations of Malaysians," she said.

Investigations needed

Meanwhile, Ambiga also commended PAS' uniformed welfare outfit - the Unit Amal - and police personnel who did not perpetuate the violence for maintaining order during the earlier half of the rally.

"I also state that there were many police on that day who did act with restraint and honour. But there were others who clearly got a different memo from the top.

NONE" They were ruthless and behaved like thugs inflicting maximum damage on the retreating participants. There were instances when they deliberately instigated the crowd," she said.

Ambiga said evidence was continuing to emerge and Bersih 2.0 was compiling such data.

She urged the Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) to conduct an inquiry, because many quarters have much to answer for.

"If Bersih 2.0 has to answer questions, and we will readily do so before an independent inquiry, then the government has much more to answer for," she added.

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