

Help revive local polls, Penang BN reps told

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By Susan Loone

The 11 BN representatives in the Penang state assembly have been urged to vote with their conscience when the Enactment for Local Elections in Penang Island and Province Wellesley is tabled during the sitting this week.

State exco Chow Kon Yeow, making the call, said the quest to return the third vote to the people should not be a pointless and unnecessary squabble with the federal government.

At a public forum attended by some 80 people at the Town Hall yesterday, Chow said it is "saddening and disappointing" that the federal government continues to frustrate the state's efforts in this matter.

"There is nothing sinister about this effort to revive elections. Ratepayers, residents, local folks should be the ones deciding who sits on the local councils and makes decisions on their behalf," Chow said.

He said it is "regrettable that there is a selfish and corrupt purpose of ensuring a politics of patronage at the local level".

"This allows connections and cables to determine who sits in the local councils," he claimed during the panel discussion launched by Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng.

Chow said the "arbitrary and opaque system" cannot stand up to scrutiny and that it hinders open and fair democracy at local level.

In 2010, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak had said that local council polls are "unnecessary".

KL mayor's conduct cited

Constitutional lawyer Tommy Thomas also backed the importance of local elections, which Malaysia had suspended in 1965, in the wake of the 'confrontation' with Indonesia.

Thomas said the most powerful reason for local elections can be found in the behaviour of Kuala Lumpur Mayor Ahmad Fuad Ismail for "all the terrible decisions" that he took to prevent the Bersih 3.0 sit-in at Dataran Merdeka on April 28.

Ahmad Fuad's actions had culminated in the barricading of Dataran Merdeka, while the police obtained a court order to prevent the protest supported by the coalition of NGOs seeking clean and fair elections.

"The mayor claimed last week that he had exercised his power freely and voluntarily when all of us, the whole country, knew that he was carrying out his duties according to the order of his political masters," said Thomas.

"How can an unelected civil servant make all the terrible decisions and not be accountable for it?"

Thomas said the critical point remains that if the mayor has to face the electorate within two or three years into his appointment, he would not be making such decisions.

"He would not do that because he would definitely lose his deposit (if he stands for election)," he added, drawing laughter from the audience.

Aliran president Francis Loh and Jerald Joseph, a human rights trainer from Pusat Komnas, also spoke at the forum, which was moderated by Andrew Yong, the Penang chief minister's special legal officer.

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