

## **EC 'reforms' boost polls expenses, claims Tindak**

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**By Nigel Aw**

While the Election Offences Act (Amendment) 2012 was abruptly withdrawn forced by the uproar against the changes seen as hamstringing election observers' functions, several others appeared to have escaped the radar screen.

This, election education group Tindak Malaysia chief Wong Piang Yow said, is seen in five amendments to the Election Regulations instituted since June last year while others include procedural changes that may not require legal adjustments.

Some changes were positive, such as the implementation of indelible ink, the abolition of three-day period for candidates to drop out to prevent bribes induced last minute withdrawals and minor improvements to election forms.

However, one serious concern, said Wong, is a procedural change introducing a fourth clerk at polling stations, tasked to ensure that ballot papers are properly placed in the ballot boxes.

This, he said, will push up in the election cost by at least RM7 million, pointing out that the country's election expenses are already one of the highest in the world.

"We spent RM172 million in the last general election, that translates close to RM15 (US\$5) per eligible voter.

"If you compare with the US, it's between US\$1 to US\$3, Australia is US\$3 plus, India and Pakistan around US\$1," he said.

The country that supersedes Malaysia in cost is Afghanistan, he said, "but that's a war torn country".

He added that based on the NGO's voter education training, two clerks would more than suffice.

'More postal voters despite criticism'

This, Wong said, would mean an extra 25,000 polls workers who would qualify to apply to be postal voters.

"While we're trying to reduce postal votes because people don't trust it, now they (Election Commission) are going to boost the numbers," he said.

While advance voting has been introduced, he added its expansion to cover spouses of police in the General Operation Force also raises concerns as they can still apply to be postal voters.

These changes were instituted based on the report of the parliamentary select committee on electoral reform which was established after the Bersih 2.0 protest in July last year.

However, Wong charged that while the panel was discussing the proposed reforms, the EC had gone ahead with its own amendments to the Election Offences Act that regressive to electoral transparency.

"Such amendments take months to draft, which means they were planning to undercut the PSC from day one, they've made a farce out of the PSC," he said.

EC snubs electoral reform group

Following the third Bersih rally on April 28 this year to protest what they say as insufficient reforms to the electoral system, the EC has now completely snubbed the electoral reform group, going to the extent of wanting to drop its yellow field colour to dissociate itself from the movement.

Despite the snub, Wong insisted that the show of force in the form of some 250,000 people turning up for the latest Bersih protest has exerted extra pressure on the EC but NGOs still have work awaiting.

"Bersih is a mass agitation movement and they've been very successful in evoking consciousness, the next step is to translate its demands into amendments to electoral laws and regulations, this is where we come in," he said.

Wong's Tindak Malaysia which has assisted Bersih in drafting the electoral law amendments during the PSC hearing said it is now working on drafting a more comprehensive legal framework concerning elections.

Flag up for future

"We also train polling agents to be inside polling centres and also election observers for the Jom Pantau programme," he said.

This, he said, included rendering service to any political party that may approach the group for training as polling agents as well as for private individuals.

"Our approach is we train people with the objective of promoting free and fair elections, it is up to them to decide which political party they want to serve.

"Alternatively we can assign them depending on their preference and if they are okay with it, we assign them to political parties at random," he said.

These measures, he said, would hopefully be able to mitigate any electoral fraud as the EC has refused to take electoral reform seriously.

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