

Experienced polls observer turns down EC invite

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By Jonathan Yong

Although the Election Commission (EC) has proudly named five NGOs as observers for the 13th general election, a NGO which has extensive experience in monitoring elections has chosen to sit it out.

The National Institute for Democracy and Electoral Integrity (NIEI) which, unlike the other five groups, has experience in observing elections overseas, said it does not agree with the conditions the EC wants to impose on the observers.

NIEI chairperson K Shan (left) told Malaysiakini that his organisation turned down the EC's invitation because there is no legal mechanism to regulate the observers and also because the EC framework was drawn up in an ad-hoc manner.

"Election observing must be objective and independent to ensure an open process. How can we be observers when there is no mechanism to govern the observers?" asked Shan, a lawyer by training.

NIEI has been part of two dozen international election monitoring missions, including in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Taiwan.

The NGO has also conducted an independent audit on the national electoral roll in March, which revealed that eight percent of the voters' addresses were invalid.

Despite turning down the EC invitation, Shan stressed that NIEI would continue to engage with the commission and help formulate regulations governing election observers to ensure transparency and public participation.

"We will also focus on building the momentum from the ground through grassroots organisations to ensure effective election monitoring," he said.

This, Shan explained, was to ensure that election monitoring becomes a "participatory, rather than an academic exercise".

Election monitoring is a major exercise and a sizable team of trained monitors are needed if it is to be effective.

Some observer groups ignored

The five NGOs the EC has named as election observers are think-tanks Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) and Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli), graft watchdog Transparency International-Malaysia, human rights body Promotion of Human Rights (Proham)

and independent pollster Merdeka Centre.

However, they must comply with the terms and conditions set out by the EC including a gag order against speaking to the media during the election campaign.

It is understood that several groups with experience in monitoring elections or expertise in electoral matters have not been invited as observers by the EC, bucking the trend in most of Malaysia's neighbours, including the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia.

Among the groups ignored by the EC is Jom Pantau, which has expertise in grassroots election monitoring.

When contacted, the movement's leader Arul Prakkash was sceptical about the effectiveness of the EC plan.

Prakkash explained that the purpose of having observers is for them to watch over the EC, but the conditions set will not allow for this.

"The EC should not impose any restrictions on the observers. It should not stipulate that they cannot talk to the media," he added.

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