

**Ambiga forges on despite threats**  
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**By John Grafilo, dpa**

The leader of Malaysia's electoral reform movement Ambiga Sreenevasan is remarkably calm for someone who has been threatened, harassed and vilified over the past few months.

"The extent of demonising is ridiculous," the veteran trial lawyer says at her office in Kuala Lumpur.

She cites a series of bizarre rallies in front of her residence, including a picket by a small group of traders who cooked hamburgers, apparently to insult her Hindu religion.

Former soldiers also held "butt exercises" in front of her house, gyrating their behinds ostensibly to protest the April 28 electoral reforms rally, which she organized and led as co-chair of Bersih, or the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections.

Another group of protesters accused her betraying her country and demanded that she leave.

Recently, pro-administration legislator Mohamad Aziz said Ambiga should be hanged for the treacherous act of organising the April Bersih rally, which was alleged to have aimed to topple the government.

Bersih's demands include free and fair access to the media for all parties and reform of the balloting system.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak described the rally as an attempt to copy the Tahrir Square demonstrations in Cairo that deposed former Egyptian dictator Hosny Mubarak.

The demonstration in Kuala Lumpur ended in violence when police fired tear gas and chemical-laced water at the protesters.

'Hired guns out to kill you'

But Ambiga denies the April demonstration was aimed at toppling the government, adding that the situation in Malaysia is vastly different from those in Middle Eastern countries plagued by political unrest.

"Are they (Malaysian leaders) thinking they're as bad as (the late Libyan leader Moamer) Gaddafi was or any of those dictators?" she says.

"I don't think they are, to be fair. But we want to stop the rot before we get to any of these extreme situations."

Mohamad Aziz has since apologized for his remarks, but Ambiga says she does not expect the vilification, the harassment and the threats to end, especially from stalwarts of the ruling coalition who have grown used to having their way unchallenged for over 50 years.

Government prosecutors have filed civil cases against her for the damage caused to public

and private property during the protest.

She recently lodged a police report about an email she received warning her, "Beware, hired guns out to kill you," the latest of the threats she has received.

Ambiga admits she is concerned about the threats against her life.

"I have two bodyguards at the insistence of my family and I think that's fair enough. I'm careful. I'm not stupid. I'm not foolhardy," she says.

She says it did not occur to her that accepting the role as leader of Bersih in 2009 would be such a controversial job.

"I thought electoral reform is a totally non-controversial, boring subject. I didn't think that it would be such an issue," she says. "But I have no regrets."

Only one demand implemented

The former president of the Malaysian Bar Association says harming her would not weaken the people's resolve to strive for free and fair elections.

"The genie is out of the bottle. The people have been empowered. Obviously a lot of people were unhappy but didn't know how to manifest that unhappiness," she says.

"I think Bersih provided them an outlet."

Ambiga says that among the eight reforms they were pushing, only the use of indelible ink has been implemented.

She underscores the need to clean up the electoral roll to get rid of thousands of suspected phantom voters that could decide the outcome of the next elections.

She says the political opposition has been supportive of Bersih's call for electoral reforms. She urges the government to support their cause, instead of fighting them.

"We have invited the government," she says. "We have offered our help, we are happy to work with the government and I think they will surely get more votes if they work with us."

Ambiga says she was already looking forward to returning to her private practice and living a simple life as litigation lawyer, which was her job for the past 30 years.

"I enjoy trials, submissions," she says. "I also want to go back to my work with the indigenous people. I want to enjoy music, read books, travel a lot and watch movies."

But for as long as she's the leader of Bersih, Ambiga vows to pursue relentlessly the movement's reform agenda despite personal perils.

"It's irresponsible to walk away," she says. "Of course, I'm human. Very often I asked the question, 'What did I get myself into? Why me?'"

