

EC claims hide true voter story

MalaysiaKini.com

July 27, 2012

By William de Cruz

Claims by the Election Commission's (EC) chairperson that Malaysians overseas are not interested in the postal vote hide the story of how nearly 1 million citizens abroad are discriminated against and denied voting rights by his own hand.

Abdul Aziz Mohd Yusof and his deputy, Wan Ahmad Wan Omar, make the assertions because only about 20,000 (or two percent of an estimated 1 million working overseas) have registered with their embassies and consulates as voters; this number excludes Malaysians abroad who are registered at home as ordinary voters.

But neither should be surprised, really - the Election Commission's own black hole of eligibility has disenfranchised the rest.

EC executive concerns cloud two facts. First, most of the uninterested Malaysians they refer to actually belong to government-linked citizenship categories. Second, both gentlemen have yet to initiate moves to give postal-voting rights to all other overseas Malaysians, despite growing demands to do exactly that, including from a parliamentary select committee.

As they stand, EC-administered laws only allow four categories of citizens living abroad to cast their votes as 'absent voters' - military personnel, public servants and full-time students, as well as their spouses, who may lodge their votes with their respective high commissions or consulates.

All other overseas citizens are excluded from the postal vote - to participate in an election, they must return to Malaysia.

These Malaysians have been far from silent, and MyOverseasVote (MOV) is only one high-profile non-government organisation that has for years been pushing an obstinate EC to do the right thing. In KL, electoral reform group Bersih and its support network, Global Bersih, have long clamoured for an inclusive postal voting system.

Naturally, when the EC claimed that its programme to register postal voters had seen "very poor" response, Malaysians overseas were bewildered and confused, if not shocked and indignant at having been so misrepresented over their inability to vote.

As far as voter-registration is concerned, the EC has promoted by preference, only reaching legislatively stipulated citizens and ignoring the vast majority of potential voters.

David Teoh, a co-ordinator for electoral reform support group Global Bersih, said: "Other 'ordinary' Malaysians still cannot vote from overseas under the EC's own law, so who is Abdul Aziz talking about when he says Malaysians are not interested?"

Speaking in Melbourne, Teoh said: "While all students are able to register as postal voters, the consulate here has so far primarily promoted the registration to government-linked scholars.

'Contradicting himself'

"People at home need to know overseas citizens want to vote from abroad, but the EC says we are not allowed to."

Teoh added: "A reasonably competent Election Commission chairperson would at the very least uphold a standard of care to avoid habitually making statements contradicting himself."

Andrew Yong, the co-ordinator of MyOverseasVote, said, "Until the EC amends the regulations, the only people who can register as postal voters are a handful of embassy staff and about 20,000 postgraduate students.

"Malaysians have been waiting since last August for the EC to amend the regulations. Nobody has time to go down to the embassy to register our addresses if we can't register as postal voters."

An exasperated Yong, who took the EC to court over discrimination against voters but lost, added: "This is a ruse by the EC to deflect attention from their failure to amend the regulations."

A joint study by the World Bank and Malaysian government estimates there are 1million Malaysians working overseas and, as far as MOV is concerned, that's the best guess of how many living abroad are potential voters. Considering that 16 million Malaysians are eligible to vote but only 12.5 million (overseas and at home) are now registered, that's a huge electoral number.

But any move by the EC to reach all overseas Malaysians would present an inconvenient truth to BN, because their voting intentions might just be a nightmare for the ruling coalition.

Abdul Aziz said last year that the EC was mulling over whether it should accord voting rights to a huge and electorally significant number of citizens living overseas.

Kerdau ballot box 1He's been busy ignoring them ever since. But while the commission continued to deny their voting rights, Wisma Putra's foreign office recently appointed 35 out of 104 Malaysian missions abroad as assistant registrars, to enlist voters arguably beholden to the government as scholarship holders, embassy staff or uniformed personnel, and have them register as postal voters.

The EC has also been diligent in purposeful legislative amendments. Going by changes to the Election Regulations (Conduct of Elections) (Amendment) (No. 2, 2012), enforceable from April 30, 2012, all armed forces and police General Operations Force personnel and their spouses will vote in advance of elections. Armed forces and police personnel on duty far away from their polling centres may now also apply to be absentee voters.

On the other side of Malaysia's electoral divide, overseas citizens denied the postal vote have checked with Malaysian embassies and consulates in Britain, France, Switzerland, Ireland, Sweden and Australia in the last few days, enquiring if the law had changed, just in case Abdul Aziz was referring to them. Without exception, they were told they would have to return home if they wanted to vote i.e. they remain ineligible to vote by post.

Turning a blind eye

Effectively, a potentially vote-swinging overseas Malaysian community lives in electoral limbo. In denying them the vote, the EC has resisted necessary legislative change that would dramatically reshape Malaysia's electoral demographic, expand the voting population considerably and (here's the hard bit for self-confessed servants of the government) introduce a totally unpredictable element into the long-looming 13th general election.

The EC is clearly turning a blind eye to nearly 1million overseas Malaysians who are being denied the right to vote, while actively working to register specific citizenship categories.

The whole voter-registration programme Abdul Aziz refers to waddles like a duck, quacks like a duck and swims like a duck - it must be discrimination.

Abdul Aziz and Wan Omar (right), constitutional guardians of the electoral process, are playing loose with the facts on voter registration overseas. Considering their 'past' political party affiliations, the greater damage is that they now oversee a system that can no longer be perceived by a discerning public as open, fair, free, accountable and constitutional.