

Bersih: Rallies just one of many solutions

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INTERVIEW While the Bersih coalition is best-known for its mammoth rallies, its new chairperson Maria Chin Abdullah stressed that protests are not the solution to all problems.

In the coming years, she said the pro-electoral reform group's main focus will include scrutiny of the Election Commission's (EC) redelineation exercise and carrying out a voter education campaign.

"The momentum just dropped (after the 13th general election), but if people keep on thinking that the rallies will actually resolve (the problems, it won't)," she said.

"The (next) rally will only be at the point when (the situation) moves into something bigger."

Maria, who took over the helm from Ambiga Sreenevasan and A Samad Said on Nov 30 last year, stressed that rallies are just one of many strategies used to push an agenda.

Without preparatory work she said, members of the public would not know what they are crusading for and there would not be much support. In addition, frequent rallies would leave supporters fatigued.

"What we really need now is to take a step back and look at what we need to do. We are hoping that through our training, people will spread the message. Of course, outreach will take some time," she said.

Maria said the group has been promoting its other work, such as challenging key legal decisions in court.

"So if people do not feel the presence of Bersih because we don't call for a rally, maybe then that would be a bit short-sighted, because a rally is not the only strategy that will have an impact. There are many, many other methods to be used."

She also noted that the size of a rally should not be the only measure of Bersih's effectiveness.

The movement was initially a joint initiative between civil society groups and opposition politicians calling for electoral reform.

It held its first rally in November 2007, drawing some 40,000 yellow-clad protestors despite a police crackdown on what was then deemed an illegal gathering.

The movement was relaunched as purely civil society initiative. It held the Bersih 2.0 rally in July 2011 and the Bersih 3.0 rally in April 2012, with a crowd turnout estimated at 50,000 and 300,000 respectively.

Smaller rallies have been held in other major cities around the country, as well as by Malaysian expatriates abroad.

The group's key demands include a clean up the electoral roll, reform of the postal ballot system, free and fair access to the media, and use of indelible ink to mark voters who have already cast their ballots.

Voter education campaign

It is also picking up on allegations of gerrymandering and malapportionment in relation to the electoral boundaries.

The EC was to have carried out a redelineation exercise last year, deferred this in light of the 13th general election which was held on May 5.

Bersih has warned of the possibility of fresh protests if the current EC commissioners are not replaced before the upcoming redelineation exercise, and intend to petition the Agong soon on the matter.

Maria said Bersih has conducted training sessions on redelineation in several states to teach voters how they can raise objections if they do not agree with the new boundaries.

Once new boundaries are proposed, notices are to be displayed in a public place. However, she said these will most likely end up in the EC's offices.

Objections must be filed within one month. Maria said this is too short a time for voters to understand the implications of the new boundaries and file objections.

"That is the time where you have to bring up 100 people (affected by the redelineation to object) - valid voters who are in that constituency.

"You cannot be in Kuala Lumpur and you want to object in Seremban, you can't. You have to come from Seremban. You have to decide why you object and all that."

The education of voters, along with other campaign work, will be coordinated by six regional coordinators nationwide.

"We have not been able to reach out to everybody so, in the next two years, we hope we can reach out to not just the urban areas but also the rural areas," she said.

Last week, Sin Chew Daily had quoted EC chairperson Abdul Aziz Mohd Yusof (left) as saying that the Prime Minister's Department is expected to table a motion on redelineation in Parliament in March.

The EC will then complete the exercise in two years and then present the new boundaries for parliamentary approval.

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