

**The Maria Chin that I know**  
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COMMENT On the eve of the massive Bersih 5 rally on Nov 19 in Kuala Lumpur, Maria Chin Abdullah, chairperson of Bersih 2.0 that organised the rally, was detained under the obnoxious Security Offences (Special Measures) Act, more commonly known by its acronym Sosma.

Since her detention, there have been an outpouring of support for her by patriotic Malaysians concerned about the current dismal state of the country's institutions of governance.

However, there are also attempts to demonise and derogate her, the latest coming from Umno's information chief.

The massive support both for Maria and all the massive rallies from Bersih 1 till the recently concluded Bersih 5 is not without basis. Malaysians want clean and fair elections, good governance that is bereft of corruption and abuses, and the right to dissent institutionalised.

Indeed, Maria has for long been involved in struggles for all these good causes. As a close friend and fellow member of Bersih 2.0's steering committee, I can vouch for this.

I first met Maria more than a decade ago. We were then involved in the national campaign against the privatisation of health care services.

Later, after I was roped into the steering committee of Bersih 2.0 in 2009, I had the honour and privilege of working with both her and Ambiga Sreenevasan, the then chairperson.

Together, they displayed fine, courageous and exemplary leadership that brought Bersih 2.0 to be the lead movement for clean and fair elections.

After Ambiga stepped down, it was the popular position of all participating NGOs that Maria should helm Bersih 2.0. Working together with her in the steering committee has been an inspiring experience.

She showed commitment to the cause, allowed plenty of space for dissent, yet never steered away from the line of struggle for an electoral system that is clean, free and fair.

Prior to her involvement in Bersih and since her return from her further studies in the United Kingdom, Maria was engaged in a broad range of good causes. One is to serve the poor, the marginalised and the deprived.

Her opposition to the increasing privatisation of health care, which if implemented would deprive the sick and poor of a key and vital social good, is a clear manifestation of this

progressive orientation of her.

### **Courage of conviction**

Next, she dedicated many years of her productive life to the issue of gender equality, empowerment of women and the fight against sexual harassment and domestic violence.

She first worked in the Women's Centre for Change in Penang and later in Empower in Kuala Lumpur, both known for their struggles for gender parity and against sexual harassment.

To me, what is most impressive of Maria is her courage of conviction. She never yields to power exercised by the federal government that is both corrupt and abusive.

When her late husband Yunus Ali was detained, along with a 100-plus others in 1987 during *Operasi Lalang*, under the equally obnoxious Internal Security Act (ISA), Maria campaigned for their release.

Since then, she has been fighting continuously for greater democratic space, the right to dissent, one of the five demands of Bersih 5 and against authoritarianism.

So, far from being anybody's agent, Maria has always been her independent self, with courage of conviction and deep devotion to the cause of serving her motherland. She is a patriot.

That is the Maria I know. That is the Maria I will always remember.

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