

## **'NGOs must get in on registering new voters'**

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The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih) is calling for non-governmental organisations to take an active role in new voter registration, to complement the current exercise political parties are undertaking across the country.

Bersih has handed over a memorandum to the Election Commission (EC) branch office in Penang calling for the body to include NGOs in its effort to educate the public on their voting rights.

NONESeberang Perai Tengah Ikram Malaysia branch deputy secretary Harryzan Yaakub also urged NGOs to get involved in the exercise to complement the political parties' efforts, otherwise many may not be registered in time for the coming polls, highly speculated to be early next year.

"This is one of our suggestions to help the EC as it has admitted that political parties were slow in registering voters," Harryzan told the press after the coalition's meeting with Penang EC chief Morat Pora.

"Ikram Malaysia has 36 branches in the country and Bersih has 60; if we can pull in about 20 percent of new voters, I believe we can contribute a lot to the coming elections," added Harryzan, who is also Penang Jemaah Islah Malaysia branch deputy secretary.

"Besides, people may not want to go and register at the counter of a political party which they do not support. As NGOs we are more neutral and (anyone is) open to come and register with us," he stressed.

Earlier, Bersih representatives met Morat in his office in Komtar to brief him on the contents of the memorandum, which included 15 recommendations for electoral reform.

Cultural Development Centre (LLG) chairperson Toh Kin Woon, Jemaah Islaah Malaysia (Penang chapter) chairperson Taufek B Abd Rahman and secretary Isahak Ismail, Suaram coordinator Ong Jing Cheng and student group Dema representative Khaw Seng Hean were also present.

### EC welcomes assistance

The meeting represents Bersih's efforts in spreading its message of reform across the country. It handed over a similar document to the EC headquarters in Putrajaya last week.

NONEMorat said he welcomed the initiative, saying, "I am open to these suggestions, as they are for the good of all. The EC is willing to conduct training and briefings to those who want to help us improve the election process."

"However, please write in officially and I will forward your request to our headquarters in Putrajaya," he added.

Meanwhile, Taufek urged NGO representatives nationwide to offer themselves voluntarily to help register new voters.

"We suggest that it happens everywhere, from mosques, churches to schools, public functions and factories, where there are hundreds of people (but no one yet provides them the service)," he said.

NONEIsahak (left), who is also Ikram Malaysia secretary, said NGOs can also assist in electoral roll audits as they are closer to their communities.

"Usually it is more difficult for individuals themselves to go and check the details in the electoral roll, but we as NGOs can obtain the list and help them to do an audit," he added.

Khaw proposed that universities and colleges have counters to register new voters as youths often lack awareness about their voting rights.

"We suggest the EC allow automatic voting for those above 18 years old; it is better if youths get involved in the country's political process while they are young," he said.

"This would prepare them for the very important task of administering the country when they get older," he said.

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