

Polls watchdog tells cops: It's an election, not war
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Beh Lih Yi

An election watchdog today reminded the police that its heavy presence armed with riot gear throughout the Ijok by-election campaign is unwarranted as they are not fighting a 'civil war'.

"Visible presence of the police are necessary to maintain peace and order but the massive deployment of police in riot gear is unnecessary," the Malaysians for Free and Fair Elections (Mafrel) chairperson Abdul Malek Hussin said when contacted.

"It creates an impression that we are not having a by-election but indeed having a political civil war," he stressed, adding that the contesting parties and candidates must be allowed to meet the voters freely in an election campaign.

Abdul Malek was asked to comment on the heavy presence of police and the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) personnel throughout the Ijok by-election campaign, a small town in Selangor located about 50km northwest of Kuala Lumpur.

Opposition ceramah halted

The police, aided by the FRU, have moved in to halt several ceramah (political talks) by the opposition PKR after claiming these were 'illegal gatherings'.

In most of the cases, at least 10 trucks of the police and FRU were sent to disperse the crowd.

On the issue of needing police permits to hold ceramah during campaigning, the Mafrel chairperson said there was a need to review the condition.

Voters have the right to know the issues raised by the candidates during the election campaigns in order to make an informed choice, he added.

He also voiced concerns that the police's discretion in issuing permits for ceramah during election may lead to abuse as the force falls under the Internal Security Ministry, which is controlled by leaders from the ruling party.

"It paves way to abuse and misuse of power for partisan purpose. They (the police force) can be used (by BN) against their opponent," Abdul Malek added.

The heavy-handed manner of the police in halting opposition's activities at the Ijok by-election has elicited strong criticisms and prompted a visit from Deputy Internal Security Minister Mohd Johari Baharum to Ijok yesterday.

After a one-hour meeting with the opposition parties and police, Johari told reporters that the police would allow opposition ceramah provided that the police are informed of it by 12 noon every day.

However, about an hour after the opposition was given the assurance, police stopped two

opposition ceramah in Batang Berjuntai and Batu 8, Pekan Ijok on the grounds of them being illegal gatherings.

MIC concert halted too

The PKR organisers at Batang Berjuntai tried in vain to negotiate with the police but after PKR questioned why the police allowed a MIC-sponsored concert (photo below) just opposite the PKR ceramah venue, the police moved in to stop that concert.

"The police initially told us a permit was not needed for entertainment," said PKR Youth leader and lawyer Latheefa Koya, who was at the scene to negotiate with the police.

At the ceramah in Pekan Ijok, which featured mostly PAS leaders, the opposition's negotiation with the police also was to no avail.

Separately, the police with two FRU trucks also attempted to stop one PKR's ceramah held in Sungai Darah last night but failed after the organisers provided the permit for the gathering.

On the contrary, the BN's campaigns have gone interrupted thus far.

Local resident Leong Wai Mun (right), a 34-year-old worker at a hardware shop, was annoyed with the police's move to halt the opposition ceramah.

"We are not terrorists, why they sent the 'red army' (referring to FRU personnel) to stop the event?" he asked when met after the police halted the PKR ceramah in Batang Berjuntai.

"I just live opposite (the ceramah venue) but they (the police) are taking away my rights to step out of my house and go where I want to go now," Leong said, adding that the atmosphere is similar to curfew imposed during an emergency.

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