

Activists warn elections will be 'dirtiest ever'
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The March 8 general election could be the "dirtiest ever", activists said today after authorities dumped plans to curb fraud by marking voters' fingers with indelible ink.
MCPX

The New York-based Human Rights Watch also said Malaysians will be denied a fair vote in Saturday's polls, accusing the government of muzzling the opposition and manipulating the electoral process.

The Election Commission (EC) said yesterday it would not introduce indelible ink as planned because it had uncovered a plot to sabotage the polls by using smuggled ink to mark unsuspecting voters before they cast their ballot, which would cause confusion.

Abdul Rashid EC chairman and indelible ink for election 010607EC chief Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman said in a statement that the decision was made to avoid problems with public order.

He added: "The EC views these issues seriously, as the election process and public order and security cannot be compromised. The EC deeply regrets its decision."

Opposition parties condemned the decision as "ludicrous", saying it was designed to counter a groundswell of support for their cause, and accused electoral authorities of being in league with the government.

But Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi criticised opposition claims that the ink plan was dropped in bid by his ruling government to fix the polls.

"There is no such thing. We never cheat. We have been successful not because we cheated, we did well and we worked hard," he was quoted as saying by Bernama news agency.

"Now the opposition is happy because now they have an excuse to tell the whole world why they cannot succeed in the election. It's the best excuse for them," he added.

The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih), an alliance of opposition and civil society groups, said it would now be easier for "phantom voters" to alter the course of the ballot.

"Bersih warns Malaysians that the general election on March 8 could be Malaysia's dirtiest election ever as a result of the Election Commission's decision to cancel the indelible ink on polling day," it said in a statement.

Unwilling to allow reforms

HRW said the Barisan Nasional coalition, which has ruled for half a century, was intent on retaining its two-thirds parliamentary majority and unwilling to allow reforms being demanded by Bersih.

"Once again, elections in Malaysia are grossly unfair to the opposition," the global rights monitor's deputy Asia director Elaine Pearson said in a statement.

the indelible ink 040208"Voters in Malaysia deserve a chance for every vote to count and count equally," she added. "Given the vast array of anomalies in the electoral rolls, this looks increasingly unlikely."

HRW said that already tight control on the media had become even more glaring during the campaign, with state-run and government-linked outlets observing a virtual blackout on the opposition.

While the government held rallies with tens of thousands of people, dissenting voices were refused permission to hold public meetings, and peaceful protests were dispersed with the use of tear gas and water cannons.

HRW said that in the face of major irregularities in the election process, there were concerns the government will manipulate the voting in closely fought districts.

It cited research by electoral reform campaigners who said that almost 9,000 voters born more than 100 years ago - including two reported to be 128 years old - were enrolled to vote, raising suspicions about phantom voting.

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