

Bersih 2.0's Walk For Democracy: The Govt Shows Its True Colours?
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SUARAM condemns in the strongest terms the conduct of the government of Malaysia in their handling of the 9 July electoral reform rally – 'Walk for Democracy' - called for by the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, Bersih 2.0 (bersih in Malay means clean). The Inspector-General of Police, Ismail Omar said that 1667 persons had been arrested on the day of the rally, including 151 women and 18 minors.[1] Among those arrested were members of the Bersih 2.0 Steering Committee, Maria Chin and S. Ambiga; and Members of Parliament, Sivarasa Rasiah, Tian Chua, Azmin Ali and Khairy Jamaluddin.[2]

In KL Sentral railway station, police not only confined a peaceful crowd in the underpass, but also proceeded to fire numerous rounds of teargas canisters angled directly at them. Teargas canisters can be harmful if fired directly at people and used in confined spaces. The incident injured Bersih 2.0 leaders, PAS Shah Alam MP Khalid Samad, and Anwar Ibrahim's bodyguard Fayyadh Afiq. Dozens emerged from the underpass choking on clouds of teargas. Further, Mohamed Sabu, PAS Deputy President, was injured en-route to Masjid Negara by a police Land Rover that deliberately knocked into his motorbike.

In the run up to the rally, the Barisan Nasional (BN)-led government conducted a systematic campaign of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and ordinary citizens for supporting Bersih 2.0, arresting over 200 persons in a little over a week. More were "called in for questioning", some of whom were subjected to almost 12 hours of detention for said "questioning". Some of these arrests were for little more than wearing a yellow t-shirt while having breakfast (yellow is the colour of Bersih 2.0).

Systematic campaign of harassment and intimidation

6 Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) activists were detained for "waging war" against the King and/or "resurrecting Communism"; and now have been detained under the draconian Emergency Ordinance (EO), which allows for indefinite detention without trial, solely at the discretion of the Home Minister.

The mainstream media went out of their way to paint prominent civil society members as fronts for "foreign powers", with very little credible evidence offered. The government owned television channel, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) screened public service announcements denouncing the "evils of demonstrations"; and how protests are not "part of" Malaysian culture.

But this was not enough. Every government institution was called into play in this campaign, including the supposedly neutral Elections Commission (EC), the target of Bersih 2.0's electoral reform demands. The Land Public Transport Commission took the step of freezing temporary bus permits for travelling into Kuala Lumpur on 8 and 9 July.

Even private corporations joined in on the act, with tolled highway concessionaires flashing messages on their electronic billboards warning people not to participate in any "illegal" assembly. Friday sermons too, joined in the chorus of vilification, calling Ambiga an "enemy of Islam", echoing similar comments made by the Prime Minister, Najib Razak.

In the last few days before the rally, students received a circular, prohibiting them from attending any "illegal rallies" under threat of expulsion. Civil servants received a similar notice from their department heads, threatening disciplinary action and even sacking for

any civil servant found to be participating in any "illegal rally".

Restrictions and Attacks on Human Rights Defenders and Politicians

91 people were served with restriction orders of questionable legality, barring them from certain parts of Kuala Lumpur on 9 July, under threat of arrest. Roadblocks were set up along major highways and roads leading into the city, as a "precautionary measure" necessary for public safety.[3] On the eve of the protests, police officers conducted room to room searches, looking for possible rally participants.

Have we mentioned the death threats made against Ambiga and Khairy Jamaluddin? Or the thinly veiled threats made by United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) linked organisations and personalities against participants and supporters of Bersih 2.0? Or that the intimidation and arrests continued despite the intervention of King?

Evidence has surfaced that suggests all this was orchestrated to stop citizens from exercising their fundamental right to freedom of expression and opinion; and of peaceful public assembly. It did not work.

SUARAM's Stand and Demands!

SUARAM applauds the tens of thousands of ordinary Malaysian who gathered in Kuala Lumpur on 9 July and stood up for their rights and fundamental liberties, for once not cowed by the usual scare tactics. SUARAM regrets the loss of a Malaysian, Baharuddin Ahmad, who died after collapsing after the police fired tear gas at a group of Bersih 2.0 participants. We extend our condolences to his family and wish them the strength to carry on.

SUARAM calls upon the people of Malaysia to demand better of our government, to demand more transparency and accountability in governance.

SUARAM demands that the Inspector-General of Police own up to and take responsibility for the acts of violence committed by his men and officers in the discharge of their duty. The police are supposed to protect the people. However reports indicate that at least some police officers had fired tear gas in enclosed spaces and launched the canisters directly into the crowd, on orders from their superiors. Photographic and video evidence are a-plenty in cyberspace, no matter who tries to deny their existence.

SUARAM also demands that everyone still detained for all Bersih related "crimes" be released immediately and without condition. Home Minister Hishamuddin Hussein must also be made accountable for his part in this gross mishandling of the Bersih 2.0 rally.

SUARAM further demands that the National Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) initiate an immediate public enquiry into the reports of police brutality and violence that occurred during the 9 July rally.

Mr. Prime Minister: Stop Embarrassment to the Country!

SUARAM finally calls upon Najib Razak, the self-styled "people's prime minister"[4] to take ultimate responsibility for this whole debacle. He had many chances for engagement and rational discourse over the course of 2 weeks, but instead choose to be heavy handed and authoritarian. He engaged in a campaign of intimidation and of political repression, actively trying to delegitimize the role of the opposition in Malaysia's democracy while avoiding the core issue of electoral reform completely.

We would like to remind the Prime Minister that the right to freedom of expression and opinion, even of contrary ones, is constitutionally guaranteed. These rights are also granted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Malaysia is bound to uphold as a signatory. The Prime Minister must realize and understand that the events of the past 2 weeks are extremely unbecoming of a country that sits on the United Nations' Human Rights Council and aspires to first world nationhood. This is the international embarrassment that Najib Razak wanted to avoid when he clamped down on Bersih 2.0.

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