

Arrest, Harassment, Violence Towards Journalists Condemned
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We from Malaysian media civil society organisations condemn the arrest of two journalists and police violence towards others who were covering the sit-down protest for free and fair elections in Kuala Lumpur on 28 April 2012. Media reports, video feeds, Facebook postings and tweets by the said journalists or their colleagues indicate at least nine such cases:

Radzi Razak, a journalist with theSun, was admitted into hospital yesterday due to injuries suffered during an alleged attack by at least seven police personnel. His left rib is broken and he may be suffering from internal injuries. He has lodged a police report on the assault.

Arif Kartono, a photographer with English newspaper Malay Mail, alleged being assaulted by six uniformed police personnel and had his camera smashed.

Koh Jun Lin, a photojournalist with online news site Malaysiakini was arrested after taking photographs which document alleged police violence against protestors. Koh's camera and memory card were also confiscated. He was released yesterday but only his camera was returned.

P. Malayandy, a photographer with Tamil newspaper Makkal Osai, was allegedly assaulted by about five policemen for taking pictures of police detaining protestors. His RM7,000 camera was allegedly snatched away by the police.

Al Jazeera correspondent Harry Fawcett alleged police violence when his crew was documenting arrests and ill-treatment of protestors. Fawcett and colleagues were reportedly shoved and held, and their camera damaged during the incident. His video feed of Bersih 3.0 after the incident was recorded using Skype from an iPad tablet because the camera could no longer be used.

Huang An Jian, a photographer with Mandarin newspaper Guang Ming Daily, was arrested while taking photographs of the arrest of protestors and alleged police assault. He was released yesterday.

Channel News Asia video cameraperson Kenny Lew alleged being punched by police, and had his tripod seized.

Chen Shaua Fui, assistant editor of Mandarin news site Merdeka Review, claimed rough handling by four policemen who tried to snatch her camera, and when she produced her media accreditation card, it was kicked aside and she was threatened with arrest.

Lisa J. Ariffin, from news site Malaysian Insider was reportedly hit by a tear gas canister aimed at the crowd. (Note: Malaysian police has been reported to fire teargas canisters at crowds of protestors rather than into the air during previous demonstrations.)

Our organisations view these incidents as a concerted attack on media freedom since they appear to be aimed at preventing professional journalistic documentation of alleged police violence against some of the Bersih protestors.

In recent months, photographs and videos have captured scenes of violence and brutality against peaceful gatherings. These have embarrassed the perpetrators of the violence and those behind them. Only a few days ago, a mob attacked the peaceful Occupy Dataran encampment. Among those targeted were those activists wielding cameras or smart phones, ostensibly in a bid to thwart any attempt to document the violence and identify the perpetrators, leading up to the Bersih rally.

Yesterday's rally, estimated to have attracted some 80,000 supporters, was led by the Coalition for Free

and Fair Elections (Bersih 2.0).

The Coalition had intended a two-hour sit-down beginning 2pm at Kuala Lumpur's iconic Independence Square, but could only assemble around the square following a court order obtained by the police on 27 April preventing the public from entering the area until 1 May 2012. Multiple barriers and a razor wire were also erected around the square which was heavily guarded by riot police on the day of the protest. Chaos ensued after the crowd which had congregated from late morning was forced to disperse after police fired tear gas and shot chemical-laced water at them, and incidence of violence from both sides were reported.

We urge Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak to conduct a thorough and swift investigation, and charge those responsible for these violent acts, including those allegedly committed by police personnel towards journalists. Compensation must also be given to those whose equipment have been deliberately damaged. The Prime Minister must also adopt firm measures to ensure all uniformed personnel understand and respect the role of journalists.

Journalists, including press photographers, are professionals tasked with bearing witness to matters of public interest and reporting them ethically. This function is especially crucial when there are contentious subjects such as yesterday's protest, and information from as many sources as possible is needed to reveal the larger picture. Like the police, journalists have a public duty to perform and they should be afforded protection towards this end. Unless journalists are obstructing police work, they should be left alone to do their job. And certainly, no journalist in a nation that prides itself as a democracy should ever be arrested for doing their job.

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