

Bersih disavows Facebook campaign against Najib

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By Shannon Teoh



Ambiga said Bersih is not intended to seek the ouster of the existing government. — file pic

KUALA LUMPUR, July 13 — Bersih has insisted that it is not acting in the interests of the federal opposition and dismissed any links to social media initiatives calling for the resignation of Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Its chairman Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan told the Wall Street Journal in an interview published late yesterday that it has nothing to do with the Facebook group that is targeting to have 100,000 people request for Datuk Seri Najib Razak to resign. The group already has over 170,000 supporting its call.

“We have nothing to do with that (the Facebook campaign). It is never and has never been Bersih’s intention for the prime minister to step down. As I said, we want to work with the prime minister and his government to have a better electoral system,” Ambiga insisted.

The swift success of the Facebook group has spawned copycats such as “100,000 People Want Hishammuddin Hussein [to] Resign,” referring to the home minister, and other groups wanting a million or five million people to call for Najib to quit.

The Bersih chief also told the WSJ that she did not see more rallies taking place, despite PAS saying that it will push Bersih to hold another demonstration should the government ignore demands for electoral reform.

“I do not see it happening in the near future,” the former Bar Council president said when asked if the electoral reforms group would hold more rallies.

In the interview published on the WSJ website, Ambiga rubbished the notion that the cause of free and fair elections was only in the interest of Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

"Not at all fair," she said of Barisan Nasional's (BN) assertion that Bersih is just a front for PR as Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim played a prominent role in Saturday's rally that saw tens of thousands pour into the streets of the capital.

"We invited all political parties including BN to support us. How can you say the cause for free and fair elections is only for the opposition? It is for everybody. Pakatan Rakyat members are also citizens of this country. Are they not entitled to support a movement for free and fair elections?" she said.

Ambiga also explained that a more level playing field would bring "legitimacy to the government who wins. If you come in because of free and fair elections, it would be something that would be more acceptable to the people."

Along with leading regional dailies such as the Jakarta Post and Singapore's The Straits Times, the WSJ has been critical of the government's handling of Bersih, which saw over a hundred arrests in a police dragnet that began over a week before the July 9 march.

The influential international business newspaper said Najib's administration was creating an atmosphere of "fear and repression" that may result in the hitherto "silent majority" eventually voicing out against the prime minister.

Local politicians, including a deputy minister, have acknowledged the damage to Malaysia's international standing but Umno-controlled media such as Utusan Malaysia and some BN leaders continue to blame the opposition and biased news reports, especially from the foreign media for painting the government in a bad light.

Bersih went ahead with Saturday's rally despite being denied police permission, plunging parts of Kuala Lumpur into chaos and resulting in nearly 1,700 arrests, scores injured and the death of a PKR division leader's husband.

The coalition of 62 NGOs had earlier agreed to an offer by Najib to move its street gathering to a stadium but was then told by authorities not to gather in the capital, ruling out its choice of the historical Stadium Merdeka.

The breakdown in negotiations came despite the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's intervention six days before the rally, who sought to defuse tension by asking Putrajaya and Bersih to discuss the issue of free and fair

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