

**You made it happen, Ambiga tells Putrajaya**  
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**By Shannon Teoh**



The Bersih leadership, Ambiga (waving) flanked by Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, making their way in KL Sentral before being attacked with tear gas and duly arrested in Kuala Lumpur July 9 2011.

KUALA LUMPUR, July 13 — Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan said the Najib administration has only itself to blame for the overwhelming public response to Saturday's Bersih rally.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal published on its website yesterday, the chairman of the electoral reforms group also played down similarities to popular revolts in the Middle East, stating that there was never any intention to topple the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

"A government that comes across as such a great bully repulsed a lot of people. And I think that is why we had the numbers and the momentum that we did.

"Honestly, if they had allowed us to proceed and played it down, we would not have gotten those numbers," the former Bar Council president said, admitting that she at first doubted that the movement would gain such support.

Along with leading regional dailies such as the Jakarta Post and Singapore 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 that Datuk Seri Najib Razak's administration was creating an atmosphere of "fear and repression" which may result in the so far "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.

Ambiga also said that Bersih was asking for electoral reforms, not a change of government unlike the uprisings in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring which has brought down governments in Egypt and Tunisia and plunged Libya into civil war.

"All we are doing is asking for a free and fair election. It is the government's disproportionate response that created a momentum. But we are still a peace-loving nation. We still want the government to be fair.

"To me it was never our intention and it is still not our intention to bring down this government. We want to work with this government, to improve our electoral system," she told the WSJ.

She also criticised the government's response to Saturday's rally, which saw chaos reign in the capital as police fired tear gas and water cannons to disperse tens of thousands of demonstrators, stating that Putrajaya was not reading the situation correctly.

"They come back on Monday and attack Bersih again. Those are the people you are attacking. Those are the voters you are attacking," she said.

Bersih had gone ahead with Saturday's rally despite being denied police permission, 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 diffuse tension by asking Putrajaya and Bersih to discuss the issue of free and fair elections.

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