

Bersih: Fair elections 'a fantasy' with assembly law
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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 21 — Bersih 2.0 called today for the controversial Peaceful Assembly Bill to not be gazetted, as it would defeat efforts to hold free and fair elections.

The electoral reforms movement said today the proposed law, which has been passed by both Houses of Parliament, would result in a "violation of the fundamental right to freedom of assembly" if implemented.

"Bersih 2.0 is disappointed that the Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011 was passed in the Senate yesterday. Clean, free and fair elections are fantasy when civil liberties are curbed," the coalition of 62 NGOs said in a statement today.

The movement, which saw tens of thousands of supporters pour into the capital on July 9, said any move to gain royal assent and gazette the assembly Bill as law must be halted to ensure fair elections.

In a city lockdown during the rally, police shot chemical-laced water cannons and tear gas at thousands of street demonstrators in chaotic scenes that saw over 1,500 arrested, scores injured and the death of an ex-soldier.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak announced a raft of reforms over the following months, after international condemnation of his administration's clampdown.

These include the new assembly law, a parliamentary select committee on electoral reforms, and the repeal of the Internal Security Act and Section 27 of the Police Act, the latter of which requires police permits for all public gatherings.

But the Peaceful Assembly Bill was criticised by civil society and the opposition for giving even more control to authorities by initially requiring, among others, 30 days' advance notice to hold an assembly.

Although the government amended the Bill to relax several regulations, including shortening the notice period to 10 days, critics still compared it to Myanmar, known for its poor human rights record, which requires only five days' notice to hold a protest.

The Bill also prohibits assemblies from being held at dams, reservoirs, water catchment areas, water treatment plants, electricity generating stations, petrol stations, hospitals, fire stations, airports, railways, land public transport terminals, ports, canals, docks, wharves, piers, bridges, marinas, places of worship and kindergartens and schools.

Bersih also acknowledged that the Election Commission (EC) has stated indelible ink will be introduced in the next general election, but stressed this was just one of eight "crucial" demands "in ensuring the bare minimum for a clean and fair elections."

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