

Tsu Koon says police handling of Bersih rally behind PM rating dip
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 10 — The police's handling of the July 9 Bersih rally was the cause of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's recent approval rating decline, Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon charged today.

The Gerakan president agreed with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's view that the rally had affected the government's image, but stressed that Putrajaya had never meant to "stifle" anyone's freedom to speak or express themselves.

Koh (picture), a minister in the Prime Minister's Department, said measures taken by the police during the rally had given the public the "impression" that the government was "too restrictive", and that this was not true.

"Certain announcements, measures by the police, for example, they have given the people the impression that we (the government) were too restrictive. When the PM offered a stadium and they chose Stadium Merdeka, police said no for whatever reasons.

"On hindsight, what the government should have done was immediately after the stadium offer, police should invite them (Bersih supporters) and... facilitate participants to go to the stadium... without affecting the traffic in KL," he told a news conference here.

As a result of the police trying to "control" the rally, said Koh, the city had to be shut down and this "caused a lot of grievances."

"Have to be honest, the handling of it has given that kind of perception, but it was not intention of the PM; when we discussed in Cabinet he emphasised people must be given the space for freedom of expression.

"A few announcements, measures taken although in good faith, interest of security, have given perception government trying to stifle freedom of assembly and speech. As far as I know this was not the intention," he added.

Koh was responding to comments made by Dr Mahathir in an Astro Awani interview aired yesterday where the former PM said that Najib's recent approval rating decline was due to his administration's handling of the Bersih rally.

Dr Mahathir agreed with the findings of Merdeka Center's latest survey, which saw Najib's approval rating slide to its lowest point of 59 per cent since last May's high of 79 per cent. He said that the government's image was badly affected due to the strict measures taken by authorities in maintaining public order on July 9.

The former prime minister pointed out that Putrajaya had acted wrongly by banning people from wearing yellow shirts.

A Merdeka Center survey had concluded that the rating drop was fuelled by rising concerns

over the surge in living costs and Putrajaya's handling of Bersih 2.0.

But Koh said that proof of Putrajaya's sincerity in addressing Bersih's demands was through its 'sincerity' in proposing the parliamentary select committee for electoral reforms.

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) lawmakers have basked in the aftermath of the survey results, claiming it indicated a clear voter swing towards the federal opposition, while Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders chose to stay indignant, saying the poll may not have been an accurate reflection of voter sentiment

The survey involved respondents aged 21 and above across the peninsula who were selected through a random stratified sampling along the lines of ethnicity, gender, age and state of residency. Of the 1,027 polled, 59 per cent were Malays, 32 per cent Chinese and nine per cent Indians.

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