

Bipartisan review panel proves BN values clean elections, says Dr Chua

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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 16 — MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek has fully backed the prime minister's call to set up a bipartisan parliamentary committee to look into electoral reforms, saying the decision proved the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) is committed to honest elections.

However, the former federal lawmaker appeared to suggest that the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) pact would still likely raise trouble despite Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's announcement of the select committee.

"We support a clean electoral roll. The problem is there are 12 million voters and if there is any mistake in the electoral roll, the opposition will spin in such a way that the government is cheating," Dr Chua said last night.

Najib said a parliamentary select committee will be formed "as soon as possible" to examine the current electoral system, the key demand of the Bersih July 9 rally.

Najib's announcement is seen as a major concession that acknowledges the political fallout from his administration's harsh clampdown on the rally.

His administration was roundly criticised in the international media, with his reformist image taking a major hit after the authorities took extreme measures including firing tear gas and water cannons at largely peaceful demonstrators.

Najib's decision also suggests that he was forced to give space to Bersih and its iconic leader Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan as the government has been floundering since last month's rally.

Dr Chua was mum on whether Najib's announcement would cost the BN to lose further ground with voters in national polls widely expected will be called by year end.

Electoral reform group Bersih took to the streets here on July 9 to demand for fair and free elections, defying warnings of police action, which finally resulted in nearly 1,700 arrests, scores injured and one ex-soldier dead.

The government crackdown led to international criticism and a group of Malaysians even protested when Najib visited London, a rare experience for any Malaysian prime minister abroad.

The Najib administration and the Election Commission (EC) have hitherto defended the current electoral system against Bersih's series of reform demands, which include automatic voter sign-ups, access to media, the use of indelible ink, longer campaign periods, among others.

But the EC said some of the demands can only be done via amendments to the law, adding it was already cleaning up the electoral roll to weed out "phantom voters".

The EC is also planning to introduce a biometric system to verify voters, but Bersih and opposition parties claim it can be abused, and pointed out that more than 1,000 permanent

residents became citizens overnight and were immediately registered to vote.

The Home Ministry has denied the claims and said new citizens were due to a quicker administrative process under Najib's Government Transformation Programme (GTP).

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