

In nod to Bersih, PM announces vote system relook
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 15 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak today 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 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 concession 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.

But he runs the risk of criticisms from right-wing elements in Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN) even as he mulls snap polls.

The prime minister said that committee will include lawmakers from both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat.

“A parliamentary select committee will be formed in the nearest time and it will be made up of government and opposition representatives.

“This committee will discuss all the questions and issues raised about electoral reform so that a mutual agreement can be reached,” said Najib today.

The committee, according to the PM, would ensure that there were no further accusations of electoral roll “manipulations.”

“I, along with my Cabinet, do not want to become PM or a government without the support of the people (through legitimate votes),” added Najib.

Electoral reforms 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 electoral rolls 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 a thousand 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 quicker administrative process under Najib's Government Transformation Programme (GTP).

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