

Bersih agrees to discuss Dataran Merdeka venue with DBKL
The Malaysian Insider
April 11, 2012
By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, April 11 — Bent on using Dataran Merdeka for its rally this April 28, Bersih 2.0 said today it will accept Putrajaya's advice to communicate its plans to Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL).

But the election watchdog chairman's, Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, stressed to The Malaysian Insider that the permit application should merely be a matter of formality as Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein has already said yesterday the rally could proceed.

"To me, we have already gotten the permission. As far as we are concerned, we have the go-ahead from the government and DBKL's agreement ought to be a mere formality," she said when contacted here.

Ambiga, who last year found herself arrested over Bersih 2.0's July 9 rally, added that once the government had granted the green light, permission from the local council should "automatically follow".

"Nevertheless, we will proceed to communicate with DBKL as suggested," she said.

But the former Bar Council chairman also expressed hope that the advice to seek DBKL's nod, made by de facto law minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz yesterday, was not the government's attempt at passing the buck to another authority to resolve the issue.

Bersih 2.0 has selected Dataran Merdeka as a venue for Bersih 3.0 due to its historical relevance to the people's struggle for Independence and a democratic Malaysia.

If the Najib administration is sincere and has no objection to the rally, Bersih's third such gathering for free and fair elections, there should be no further objection from any other party, including from DBKL, she said.

"We do not wish history to repeat itself in the manner with which we were messed around in relation to Stadium Merdeka the previous time," she said.

Ambiga added that Bersih 2.0 had checked the schedule for Dataran Merdeka and found that no conflicting event has been planned for April 28.

"Dataran Merdeka is free on that day and that time," she said.

In separate statements to the media yesterday, Hishammuddin and Nazri had given the go-ahead to Bersih 2.0 to stage "Bersih 3.0", provided that all matters pertaining to its chosen Dataran Merdeka venue are resolved.

Hishammuddin had urged the group to negotiate with the police on an appropriate location while Nazri had said it was okay for the event to proceed at Dataran Merdeka provided that

permission is obtained from its owner.

Apart from seeking permission from the venue owner, Nazri had said that Bersih 2.0 need not obtain any permit from the police, in the spirit of the recently passed Peaceful Assembly Act 2011 (PAA).

The iconic Dataran Merdeka, or "independence square", where the Malayan flag was hoisted for the first time after independence, had long belonged to the Royal Selangor Club before it was taken back by DBKL in 1987.

According to the City Hall's website, DBKL is the authority responsible for managing and maintaining the square.

The PAA was proposed and passed last year after an uproar was raised over the government's handling of Bersih's last rally on July 9.

In a media statement today, Bersih's steering committee disagreed that an alternative venue should be sought and pointed out that no clear enforcement date has yet been set on the PAA, which does not list Dataran Merdeka as a lawful gathering point.

"Bersih 2.0 has selected Dataran Merdeka as a venue for Bersih 3.0 due to its historical relevance to the people's struggle for Independence and a democratic Malaysia.

"We certainly do not see any reason why Dataran Merdeka is unsuitable in the light of the many events that have recently been held there, including 205th Anniversary of the Royal Malaysian Police," the group said.

The committee added that it would soon be writing to the police to resolve the issue and hopes that the force would lend help in keeping traffic smooth on the day of the rally.

Bersih 2.0's July 9 rally last year had saw thousands throng the capital city's streets to march for free and fair elections during a time when gatherings were still deemed illegal without permit from the authorities.

At about midday, riot police fired tear gas and chemical-laced water to disperse protesters who had assembled for an otherwise peaceful event calling for electoral reform.

The clampdown drew negative publicity for the Najib administration in the foreign media, and was seen as among the key reasons behind the proposal for the new assembly Act.

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Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/bersih-agrees-to-seek-dbkl-notice-for-dataran-merdeka/>