

Bersih supporters 'upbeat', calm during rally, Ambiga tells Suhakam inquiry
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 13 — There were no signs of aggression or violence from Bersih supporters during last year's July 9 rally, the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) was told today.

Bersih 2.0 chairman Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan testified today in front of an inquiry panel that although "upbeat, (Bersih supporters) remained calm and peaceful" throughout the rally.

"No sign of violence or aggression from the crowd... they responded well to police instruction to retreat," she said, referring to her encounter with riot police at KL Sentral during the July 9 rally.

ASP S. Shanmugam, who is holding the watching brief for the police, asked Ambiga if there was justification to use force against the rally participants.

"I'm aware that they (the police) have the power, but they can't abuse it," said the lawyer in response.

The Bersih 2.0 chief, in her previous testimony to Suhakam in January, said she was at the KL Sentral underpass exit and about to head to Stadium Merdeka with other Bersih supporters when police fired tear gas canisters towards them.

"I really thought I was going to die. There was an excessive use of tear gas.

"I could not breathe ... I could not see. My bodyguard had to literally drag me out," she testified then.

Ambiga said she believed the police had "ambushed" the group at the underpass after they left the KL Hilton to proceed to Stadium Merdeka.

Bersih will hold its third rally for free and fair elections from 2pm to 4pm at Dataran Merdeka this April 28.

But this time, the gathering will also be joined by simultaneous events across the country, likely adding pressure to the government to accede to the group's demand for a total reform to the country's election processes.

Bersih's previous rally on July 9, 2011 turned chaotic when the authorities employed huge teams of riot police, armed with water cannons and tear gas canisters, to disperse the crowd of thousands.

The crowd had converged on the streets of the capital from the early hours of July 9, defying earlier warnings that their participation could result in arrests.

Over 1,600 people were detained as a result, including Bersih chief Ambiga and scores of opposition lawmakers, but Bersih 2.0 later declared the event a success based on the number of participants and the publicity it had earned in both local and international media.

The government moved quickly to enact the Peaceful Assembly Act after the event and formed a parliamentary select committee for electoral reforms.

But Bersih 2.0 maintains that reforms were inadequate and subsequently announced the April 28 Bersih 3.0 rally.

The first rally, held in 2007, was partly credited for Barisan Nasional's worst electoral performance during Election 2008, when it lost its traditional parliamentary supermajority and five states to the fledgling Pakatan Rakyat pact.

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