

Anwar invites foreign team to press Putrajaya on polls reforms
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, April 26 — Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has invited a team of international observers to Malaysia to assess the country's election system, in an apparent attempt to pile pressure on Putrajaya to step up electoral reforms.

The "pre-election assessment team" has been tasked to interview local government and political leaders, before compiling its recommendations on how to ensure a clean polls process and distributing it to stakeholders here.

The team of seven members from six countries reached Kuala Lumpur yesterday for its six-day fact-finding mission, which entails imparting concerns raised to them over Malaysia's election processes with the Election Commission (EC), ministers and ruling party leaders.

But despite being invited by the office of Parliament's Opposition Leader Anwar, the group's members insisted today on their independence, even claiming that their expenses for the mission are being borne by themselves or their respective governments.

"We were invited by the leader of the opposition (Anwar), but the invitation could have come from anyone because there are important principles here and we know that these are concerns that have been raised.

"We will be providing a report, all of us here on the panel, we are fiercely independent and we want to provide a report that is fair, based on facts and balanced... but the whole concept has to be one that we come here as great friends of Malaysia, of Malaysian democracy," said Nicholas Xenophon, an independent Senator for South Australia, during a press conference in Parliament this afternoon.

The Australian lawmaker however admitted to have been in contact numerous times prior to the mission with Anwar, noting that he had even met the leader twice out of his concern over Sodomy II.

He said he was also present in Kuala Lumpur during Anwar's acquittal in January, but said he was here on behalf of Australian lawmakers across the political divide.

Nicholas repeatedly stressed that Australia is "great friends of Malaysia and Malaysian democracy", adding that it was common for leaders from both nations to offer their views into the country's processes.

"We would welcome Malaysia into our country to give their views because that's that friends do - friends tell each other the truth," he said.

Nicholas was addressing reporters along with four others from the team in Parliament, after

meeting with Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz.

The others include Pakistan Senator Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom regional project coordinator Juliane Schmucker from Germany, University of the East College of Law dean Amando Valdez from Philippines and Indonesian International Scholars Association chairman Dr Nasir Tamara.

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) leaders were not present during the press conference but according to details provided to the media, the mission is chaired by Abdul Malek Hussin, who is also the parliamentary affairs chief coordinator in the Opposition Leader's office.

The group, who will also be joined by Indian journalist and author Mobashar Jawed Akbar and University of New South Wales Associate Professor Dr Clinton Fernandes from Australia, will be meeting with the EC tomorrow, as well as other stakeholders, including election watchdog group Bersih. They are also scheduled to meet with Barisan Nasional (BN) secretary-general Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor this afternoon.

During their meeting with Nazri earlier, Nicholas said fundamental concerns regarding Malaysia's electoral roll, campaign period, media access and other issues pertaining to electoral reforms were raised with the minister.

The proposed minimum 10-day campaign period under Malaysian laws, said the Senator, was too short and insufficient for political parties to present their policies to the electorate.

Piping up, Senator Mir Hasil pointed out that the minimum campaign periods in India and Pakistan are 90 days long.

"This sounds almost too long but it is a big difference with Malaysia's 10 days," said Nicholas.

He added that the discussion also touched on the issue of "one vote, one value", which he said was not reflected in Malaysia's election system.

"In some seats, there are only 7,000 to 8,000 voters, while others, there are over 100,000... this does not seem fair.

"Because in other words, it does not reflect the democratic will of the people," he said.

Nicholas said the panel expects to formulate an interim report by this Sunday, which will be presented to the media during a press conference. The final report, he said, should be completed within two weeks of the fact-finding mission.

Opposition lawmakers and civil society groups have expressed dissatisfaction with Putrajaya's electoral reform efforts, insisting that despite the formation of the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) to look into the matter, not enough has been done to ensure a clean and fair election process.

Bersih plans to hold its third rally for free and fair elections this Saturday to reflect this dissatisfaction and the event has received the backing of Pakatan Rakyat's three component parties DAP, PAS and PKR.

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