

EC credibility focal point of Ambiga-Khairi debate
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 26 — The much-anticipated face-off between Datuk Ambiga Sreenivasan and Khairy Jamaluddin last night resulted in an unresolved dispute over the Election Commission's (EC) credibility, with both parties taking turns to either trash or defend the country's election regulator.

On the one hand, Ambiga insisted on the EC's resignation, claiming the body's lethargic efforts and "lame excuses" for true electoral reform were proof that it could not be trusted.

Ambiga (left) and Khairy in thoughtful poses during their debate on April 25, 2012. — Picture by Jack Ooi

In response, Khairy said it was Ambiga who could not be trusted, saying her stubborn refusal to accept any effort taken by the EC proved that the civil society leader has been "misrepresenting" the reasons to hold Bersih 3.0 this Saturday.

"I came here tonight expecting a spirit of co-operation and reasoning.

"But ultimately, if you have already said we cannot work with the EC and want their resignation, then it is a foregone conclusion," he said.

The duo spewed countless figures and technical information to disprove one another, forcing the event into an exchange of reasons why the EC should or should not be believed.

They were perpetually interrupted by cheers and heckles from the highly-charged crowd of at least 1,000 spectators, many of whom were clear supporters of either contenders — Ambiga, the well-known civil society leader and Bersih co-chair, or Khairy, the fiery Oxford graduate and leader of the youths in the ruling Umno.

Neither, however, were announced the winner at the end of the intense 90-minute debate, the first such event to be held amid anticipation over Bersih's impending rally for free and fair elections this Saturday.

During the verbal duel, Khairy accused the election watchdog group of being pre-emptive and prejudicial to the EC's efforts for reform.

He disputed Bersih's claim that the EC had failed to satisfy the prime minister's reform pledges, insisting that at least seven out of the group's eight reform demands have either been implemented or are in the process of implementation.

"I put it to you, unlike Ambiga, that of the eight demands, seven have been met or are being addressed," he said.

"The electoral roll is being cleaned up, indelible ink implemented... the only thing is the

10-day campaign period.

"For free and fair access to media, as a Barisan Nasional (BN) MP, I support all parties given the same amount of time on all national media to tell the rakyat their policy platform and manifesto — let's be fair about that," he said.

Khairy added that many of the recommendations in the Parliamentary Select Committee's (PSC) final report were "time-bound", such as the three-month timeframe given for the EC to look into a suitable system for overseas voters.

"So why go out on the streets? I respect your right to go out but you are pre-judging and misrepresenting," he said.

But Ambiga disagreed, citing the 10 major problems in the EC's electoral roll as highlighted by academic Dr Ong Kian Ming in his Malaysian Electoral Roll Analysis Project (MERAP) preliminary findings.

She noted that according to the study, there are at least 3.1 million voters whose IC addresses show different voting constituencies from the one which they are actually voting in.

"Also, there are about 65,455 foreigners on the electoral roll. A total of 106,743 cases of deletions and 6,672 cases of additions without public display to the roll from Quarter 4 2010 to Quarter 3 last year.

"The 3.1 million is very troubling because this information was actually given to the EC by the National Registration Department (NRD) in 2002 but the EC did nothing," she said.

"The 65,455 foreigners... some removed, some added without the rolls displayed... It leaves us with a lot of doubt over whether they are actually cleaning the roll," she added.

The former Bar Council chairman, who earned hoots from the crowd as she spoke, pointed out that the EC has only been harping on the existence of some 42,051 "doubtful voters" in the roll, which it discovered after its registry was cross-checked with the NRD's records.

"Don't forget, they even downplayed this figure, saying 0.3 per cent margin of error is nothing... This is highly irresponsible, given that in the election, the margins between winning and losing is very small.

"You could knock over the state government of Selangor with 42,000 votes," she pointed out.

In his rebuttal, Khairy said if the 42,051 were indeed fraudulent cases, the EC would not have put the voters' names on public display for three months after discovering them.

He said the voters were not non-existent but were merely those who had failed to update their IC records with the NRD.

"But Bersih would have you believe they are fraudulent," he charged, to loud applause.

Further to this, Khairy pointed out that during the three-month public display period, 1,248 cases came forward to confirm the names on the roll.

"If not a single one came forward, then I'd go with Ambiga... Strike them off. But they came forward, over 1,000 names," he said.

He pointed out that if the EC had decided to strike off the names of the 42,051 voters from the roll, they would have been denying these citizens their constitutional right to vote.

Ambiga, however, called this a "lame excuse", pointing out that election laws state that the EC must revise the supplementary roll once every three months by making house-to-house calls or sending notices requiring updated information from the voters.

"If no information is returned, they are entitled to strike out these names. Why not use it?"

"On the one hand, they are violating the Constitution but when it comes to removing voters, they are suddenly coy and respectful of the Constitution," she said.

Both leaders also clashed in their views on overseas voting, with Khairy pointing out that the EC has three months to find a formula for the best voting system while Ambiga said this should have been done years ago.

"We have had Malaysians overseas for years. Why only now? And what is this about it being a logistical nightmare? They must have this sorted before the polls," she said.

Ambiga later agreed with Khairy to engage with the EC further on all outstanding issues regarding electoral reforms but said the discussion must be attended by MPs from both sides of the political divide.

But the leader repeatedly stressed on the need for reforms to be implemented before the coming polls or if this could not be done within months, then the election should be delayed.

Bersih is holding its third rally for free and fair elections at Dataran Merdeka from 2pm this Saturday.

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