

Suhakam: Ambiga not given fair media space during Bersih 2.0
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 4 — Several mainstream media organisations had last year failed to fairly report Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan's views on Bersih 2.0 and even jeopardised her safety by publishing her personal details, the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) has found.

The commission concluded in its public inquiry on the July 9 rally last year that prior to the event, media reports had even painted the former Bar Council chairman as being disrespectful of the Constitution and the country's laws.

Media reports had portrayed Amiga as being disrespectful of the Constitution and the law. —
File pic

"The panel would like to draw attention to an article submitted by W26 (Ambiga) to this panel, which was published in Berita Minggu on June 26, 2011, whereby in this article, among others, had stated that as a lawyer, W26 should understand provisions in the law and W26's act of organising the Bersih 2.0 assembly was clearly a deliberate violation of assembly laws," the commission said in its report.

It also singled out Umno-owned dailies New Straits Times and Utusan Malaysia as having published reports allegedly portraying the rally for free and fair elections as a dangerous movement that would threaten national security.

Suhakam said in the NST's June 13 report last year, the English daily had quoted the views of several independent lawmakers who had said the purpose of Bersih 2.0 was "unhealthy" and would threaten public safety.

The same view, added the commission, was also published in an Utusan Malaysia article on June 22 via interviews with individuals claiming to represent the general public who predicted that the rally would result in chaos.

"Apart from that, there were also efforts by several parties to deny W26 (Ambiga) from expressing her views.

"These efforts, among others, had portrayed W26 as a citizen who does not respect the Federal Constitution and the country's laws," Suhakam said.

Other media reports, the commission continued, were neither neutral nor balanced in its explanation of Bersih 2.0's purpose for the rally.

"Many of the news reported were one-sided and did not provide comprehensive information to the public.

"The panel is of the view that the news was not balanced on the issues involving the Bersih 2.0 assembly," it said.

The commission noted its respect towards the freedom of media organisations to publish or air news as it sees fit but said they "should be more responsible" by carrying "fair and substantiated" reports.

"Its (media) coverage should not be biased, partial or prejudiced. Similarly, all facts should be aired to help the public make their own judgments," it said.

The commission also stressed that the personal information of individuals such as home addresses or telephone numbers should not be published or aired for public viewing.

It cited Ambiga as an example, noting that a local television station had aired the leader's personal house address, which the latter had alleged was the likely cause behind the death threats she had received before Bersih 2.0.

Suhakam's 39-page report was read out to the media today by Suhakam's three-member investigative panel comprising chairman Datuk Dr Khaw Lake Tee and members Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Mahmood Zuhdi Ab Majid and Detta Samen.

The inquiry, which saw 31 individuals interviewed as witnesses, was held following numerous complaints of police brutality during the July 9 rally, Bersih's second such gathering for free and fair elections.

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