

Putrajaya's Bersih panel must be impartial, says Suhakam
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 12 — The Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) called today for Putrajaya's panel probing violence in the April 28 Bersih rally to be impartial after growing criticism over the selection of Tun Hanif Omar as the team's chief.

The opposition and civil society have called on the former police chief to be disqualified due to anti-Bersih statements that came immediately after the rally for free and fair elections, which had spiralled into chaos when protestors tried to enter Dataran Merdeka.

"The Commission awaits the determination of the terms of reference of the Panel in the hope and expectation that they are consistent with the requirements of an inquiry that will conduct its work in a manner that is independent, impartial, transparent, and with integrity and without fear or favour.

"It is extremely important that any such inquiry... be conducted expeditiously, but also with great care so as to ensure that its process and outcome will... restore public confidence in the authorities, which is an essential attribute of a fully functional democracy which the people aspire for," Suhakam chief Tan Sri Hasmy Agam said today.

He added in a press statement that Suhakam "remains seized of the matter and will continue to study the complaints and submissions from various groups, as well as media reports, pertaining to various incidences that transpired on that day."

The so-called "Hanif panel" has already been criticised for having no legal basis by Bersih and the Bar Council and both bodies have also criticised the choice of the former police chief to head the committee. The electoral reforms movement added that the former Inspector General of Police "has already made two public comments... that communist sympathisers who were active demonstrators in the 1970s were involved.

"He has also agreed with Najib's allegation that Bersih 3.0 was an attempted coup d'état against the government. By so doing, he has shown that he is biased and has already pre-judged the outcome of the investigation," Bersih said.

Bar Council president Lim Chee Wee said yesterday the panel lacked the legal framework to offer immunity against defamation or self-incrimination and power to subpoena witnesses and requisition evidence.

However, Hanif who led the police for two decades since 1974, has insisted he will be impartial, saying that he has always acted fairly in previous enquiries and police investigations.

The opposition and NGOs have called on the government to back a Suhakam probe into Bersih's third rally for free and fair elections, as the commission had also done so for a previous Bersih gathering held last July.

Suhakam's 39-page report on the July rally released earlier this month said several mainstream media organisations failed to fairly report Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan's views and even jeopardised the Bersih chief's safety by publishing her personal details.

The April 28 rally, which saw tens of thousands gather at six different locations before heading to Dataran Merdeka, was peaceful until about 2.30pm when Ambiga asked the crown to disperse.

But her call was not heard by most of the crowd who persisted around the historic square which the court had already barred to the public over the weekend.

Just before 3pm, some protestors breached the barricade surrounding the landmark, leading police to disperse the crowd with tear gas and water cannons.

Police then continued to pursue the rally-goers down several streets amid chaotic scenes which saw violence from both sides over the next four hours.

Several dozen demonstrators have claimed that they were assaulted by groups of over 10 policemen at a time and visual evidence appears to back their claim but police also point to violence from rally-goers who also attacked a police car.

The police car then crashed into a building before some protestors flipped it on its side.

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