

Bersih calls BN 'paranoid', rubbishes coup claims
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KUALA LUMPUR, June 13 — Bersih leaders today laughed off a federal minister's claim that "salt and bottles" used by protesters during the April 28 rally indicated a coup bid, calling the connection "ridiculous" and "highly imaginative."

Bersih steering committee member Dr Wong Chin Huat said the electoral reforms group has never questioned the legitimacy of the present Barisan Nasional administration despite accusing it of electoral fraud.

"What we want is to ensure the legitimacy of the next government (federal and state) is beyond question by ensuring that the legitimacy of the next elections is beyond question.

"I am amazed with the level of paranoia in some of our ministers. They are fearing their own shadows thinking that Bersih 2.0 and 3.0 were all plots to stage (a local replica of the) Arab Spring," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz told Parliament today the "salt and bottles" used by Bersih protesters was evidence that the opposition had tried to use the April 28 rally to topple the government in the style of the Arab Spring protests.

The remarks by minister in the Prime Minister's Department drew immediate criticisms from Pakatan Rakyat (PR) MPs who demanded an apology from the government for not providing concrete proof for the assertion that the Bersih rally was an attempted coup.

"Don't underrate salt and bottles. If supported by the public, it can topple governments. The opposition wanted more than 100,000 to attend Bersih to topple the government but they didn't get that number," Nazri said today.

Wong said the government was only undermining itself by making what he described as specious claims.

"The more they (BN) fear, the crazier they act, the faster they lose their legitimacy. They do well not to turn their fear into a self-fulfilling prophecy," he said.

The only way for BN to ensure its legitimacy, Wong added, was to implement all of Bersih's eight electoral reform demands instead of "ordering another 967 tear gas canisters."

"The ministers should look into mirror every morning and tell themselves, 'berani kerana benar, takut kerana salah (emboldened by truth, frightened by wrongs),' to get rid of their fear of bottles and salts. Reform the electoral process and you don't have to fear demonstrations or elections.

"That is the best guarantee that the next government will never get overthrown with bottles, salts, towels, soap, shampoos, brooms or vacuum cleaners," he said.

Wong's Bersih colleague, Maria Chin Abdullah, said that the present government should engage more with Malaysian voters and address the allegations of electoral fraud and phantom voters instead of being "unnecessarily" paranoid.

"It's ridiculous. They are making themselves the laughing stock of the country... highly imaginative, they are.

"But what they are doing is avoiding the issue of electoral reform demands. Since April 28, what have they implemented?" she told The Malaysian Insider.

Maria said Nazri's remarks could backfire on the government and make voters doubt the professionalism of BN's ministers and leaders in running the country.

Earlier today, Nazri had also cited Bersih's refusal to accept an alternative to Dataran Merdeka and, later, the violence and provocation attributed to its supporters, to back up the government's assertion that the April 28 Bersih rally was an attempted coup

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had claimed last month Bersih was an attempted coup, while Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said there were elements in the rally that wanted death and bloodshed.

The Home Ministry said during question time in Parliament yesterday it had deployed 9,274 policemen on the day "based on information we gathered that we would face threats from demonstrators."

The planned sit-in at the historic square had ended in chaos as police and protestors clashed for over four hours. The government and rally organisers subsequently blamed each other for the violence.

Police have made public video recordings showing Anwar, PKR deputy president Azmin Ali and the party's Rembau chief, Badrul Hisham Shaharin, exchanging signals to each other just minutes before the barricade was breached by another PKR grassroots leader.

But Anwar and Azmin have denied ordering protestors to enter Dataran Merdeka, insisting they were only discussing negotiations with police to allow protestors to enter the historic square.

The trio have since been charged with participating and organising an illegal street protest under the Peaceful Assembly Act after being accused by BN and even some Bersih supporters of endangering lives of rally-goers.

The government has set up a panel to investigate the April 28 violence, but the choice of former police chief Tun Hanif Omar as chairman has been widely criticised after he compared the movement to communism and accused the organisers of an attempted coup.

The April 28 rally had started peacefully but descended into chaos when some protestors breached a barricade at Dataran Merdeka, prompting police to fire tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowd.

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