

Bersih: Promised RTM airtime 'hardly free access' to media
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KUALA LUMPUR, June 13 — Putrajaya's pledge to allow political parties to promote their election manifestos through state television channel Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) cannot be considered as free media access, election watchdog Bersih said today.

Last week, Information, Communications and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said political parties will now be allowed to promote their election manifestos through RTM during campaigning period for elections.

The Umno lawmaker said the decision was reached after a Cabinet paper on requests by political parties for equal airtime to promote their respective manifestos received the nod of ministers.

But Bersih insisted the move was not the comprehensive revamp of the media that the electoral reforms group was demanding.

"What is free access? Publishing manifesto is hardly free access we're talking. What we talking about is all parties having free access to the media," Bersih co-chairman Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan told reporters.

"If you want to show commitment, open up media now. Why wait until election period, why not now?"

Ambiga said she saw no reason for "restrictions" to be imposed on the broadcast of election manifestos, adding that the government must do more to prove its sincerity in allowing equal media access for all political parties.

"We would like to see a lot more. The very fact they're so guarded in access to the media shows you there is no access at the moment," she added.

Rais had said it has been decided that the parties would be given limited time to explain their manifestos on a selected RTM channel.

He said in providing the facility, RTM would make it incumbent that they adhere to certain conditions, which could follow what was practised in the Commonwealth and developed countries or tailored to RTM's needs.

"For example, in England, the BBC gives 10 to 15 minutes for parties to promote their election manifestos subject to certain internal conditions. It is the same with Singapore and Thailand and the latest, Myanmar, with conditions acceptable to all the parties.

"Obviously, with this decision, various questions will arise and views will be forwarded. Nevertheless, the government will keep an open mind but the bottom line is that the facility has to be structured and based on the concept of broadcasting for the nation," he said.

Rais stressed, however, that as RTM was a government broadcaster, it would have to give priority to broadcasts related to the government and matters of importance to the people.

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