

Ambiga says willing to be jailed for clean polls
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By Ida Lim

KUALA LUMPUR, June 14 — Electoral reforms activist Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan said today she is willing to be jailed if Putrajaya will commit to cleaning up the election process before the country's key polls next year.

The award-winning lawyer who has been at the forefront in pushing for meaningful electoral reforms for the past two years was responding to questions from the public in an online chat hosted by Yahoo! Malaysia this afternoon.

"Are you willing to be jailed for your cause?" Yahoo! Malaysia asked.

"Yes," Ambiga replied.

The 55-year-old has also been the target of hate groups in the last two years, with some right-wing partisan NGOs asking that the government strip her of her citizenship and some BN ministers accusing her of trying to topple the ruling government from power in the latest street rally last month.

Ambiga, together with Bersih co-chair national laureate Datuk A. Samad Said, had led a sit-in protest for electoral reforms last April 28, which the movement claims were attended by 250,000 people.

Ambiga has called for Malaysians to refocus on Bersih's eight demands amid much finger-pointing after the April 28 rally ended in violence with the authorities accusing her of attempting to spearhead a coup, a charge she has vehemently denied.

The electoral watchdog wants the government to rid the electoral roll of dead voters and other dubious names and enforce a minimum campaign period of 21 days ahead of the 13th general elections. Bersih has also lobbied for political parties to be given free and fair media play and public institutions to be strengthened to stop a seeming rise in corruption and bring an end to dirty politics.

She had led tens of thousands of demonstrators in two public rallies for electoral reform in the national capital — the first on July 9 last year and more recently on April 28 — which turned violent following clashes with the authorities. However, similar rallies held elsewhere around the country, and the world, took place peacefully.

However, she refuted criticism from the public that the April 28 rally was illegal, saying that the Federal Constitution guarantees citizens the right to assemble freely.

"Anda seorang peguam,.. tetapi tindak-tanduk anda bersama BERSIH boleh disifatkan sebagai tidak menghormati undang-undang. Demonstrasi jalanan hanya menyusahkan sebahagian rakyat Malaysia.. TQ, (You are a lawyer...but your actions together with Bersih can be characterised as not respecting the law. Street demonstrations only inconvenience some Malaysians.. Thank you,)" said an Internet user who took part in the live chat who went by the name, Awang.

"Demonstrasi jalanan merupakan antara hak asasi rakyat Malaysia di bawah Perlembagaan

Persekutuan Malaysia, (Street demonstrations are among the basic human rights of Malaysians under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia," Ambiga replied.

Another participant, Elsie asked, "Ambiga, the law allows for a peaceful assembly, but not a rally. As a lawyer who should understand the law, who do you continually break the law [sic]?"

"I believe you have misread the Peaceful Assembly Act, but nevertheless, you should look at our Federal Constitution which enshrines the fundamental right to freedom of assembly. That is the supreme law that we uphold," said Ambiga.

Search engine Yahoo! Malaysia had kicked off the hour-long live chat with Ambiga at 3pm today, giving Internet users a chance to ask her any question they wanted.

Ambiga is currently being sued by the federal government in an unprecedented civil court case initiated against Bersih leaders for damages to public property worth RM122,000.

Yahoo! Malaysia has previously hosted public chats with opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin and even popular pop artiste Datuk Siti Nurhaliza.

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