

Malaysian High Comm defends censure of Singapore envoys over Bersih rally
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KUALA LUMPUR, June 30 — The Malaysian High Commission in Singapore defended today Wisma Putra's move to chide three envoys from the republic over unsubstantiated accusations from pro-Umno bloggers that they actively participated in the chaotic April 28 Bersih rally.

The clarification, however, came after a public backlash over the incident in the island republic, and may trigger another diplomatic headache for Malaysia with its southern neighbour even as it is fending off attacks from Indonesia over claims of cultural theft.

Singapore has officially responded to the accusations of its envoys' involvement by pointing out that the three had only been on the streets of Kuala Lumpur to observe the rally, along with diplomats from many other countries.

"There is also a need to appreciate the minor but nevertheless significant differences attached to the issues of diplomats attending a legitimate rally and an illegal one," Nik Ady Arman, a political counsellor at the Malaysian High Commission in Singapore, wrote in an open letter published today in the republic's The Straits Times newspaper.

He was responding to three letters published by the Singaporean daily on Thursday criticising the Malaysian Foreign Ministry's action against the three Singaporean diplomats.

"Malaysia, as a democratic country, has never restricted or prevented anyone from participating in any legitimate assembly.

"But it is important to remember that Bersih was an illegal one," Nik Ady wrote.

He said the involvement of foreign citizens in a rally deemed "illegal" would generate speculation on their motive and put the burden of ensuring their safety on the host government.

The Straits Times had published on Thursday three letters by three men who castigated Putrajaya for "picking on" Singapore when its diplomats were caught up in the street rally that saw an outbreak of violence in Malaysia's capital city when demonstrators clashed with authorities.

The letters were titled "Leave historical baggage behind" by Toh Cheng Seong, "Protests not the way to resolve issues" by Jeffrey Law, and "One Malaysian's wish for his country..." by Matthew Lee.

This is not the first time Malaysia's diplomats have written in defence of Putrajaya's actions, but the civil service officers' impartiality is being questioned by opposition lawmakers ahead of key national polls due within a year.

Last week, a Wisma Putra official rebuked a Canadian newspaper for describing Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak as a "false democrat", along with other world leaders criticised for their authoritarian rule.

Foreign Ministry undersecretary Ahmad Rozian Abdul Ghani was replying to an article written by The Globe and Mail's Mark MacKinnon, titled "A Roster Of The Modern Autocrats", in which he lumped Najib in the same league as the world's iron-fisted rulers, such as

Russia's Vladimir Putin, Palestine's Mahmoud Abbas, Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and closer to home, Cambodia's Hun Sen.

"In just three years, [Najib] has repealed Malaysia's colonial-era Internal Security Act, ended the 60-year state of emergency, introduced measures to increase media freedom, reformed the Universities and University Colleges Act, created the Peaceful Assembly Act, announced a review of the Sedition Act, repealed the Banishment Act and the Restricted Residences Act and implemented a raft electoral reforms — an impressive track record by anyone's standards," Ahmad Rozian said in his letter, published June 26 on the Canadian paper's website.

The undersecretary said MacKinnon's view did not "tally" with the opposition's record win in Election 2008, and added that Malaysian voters will once again "be free to choose who they want to lead their country" in the national polls that must be called by next year.

The Najib administration has come under criticism globally in the aftermath of violent street demonstrations here over Bersih's push to clean up the electoral roll ahead of the 13th general election.

Malaysia's three main opposition parties — DAP, PAS and PKR — won an unprecedented five states and 83 seats out of a total 222 in Parliament in Election 2008, denying the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition their traditional two-thirds control in the lawmaking body for the first time since Independence in 1957.

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