

Bersih tarnished image of Muslims, says Najib
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KUALA LUMPUR, July 19 — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said today the Bersih electoral reform protest had threatened the haj pilgrimage quota of Malaysia's Muslims, and tarnished the country's image.

"We support demonstrations, but only when they are done peacefully and in accordance with our religious principles. When some of them protested in Mecca and Medina, our image as Malaysians, as Muslims, was tarnished.

"The Saudi government even threatened to pull back our quota," he said.

Najib explained the seriousness of this issue by stating that thousands who have waited even up to 15 years would not have been able to go for their haj pilgrimage.

"Because of Bersih, we could have faced a suspension for this year, or even three years. They are destructive towards the needs of Malaysian Muslims," he said.

He also stated that those who protested for Bersih in Mecca and Medina probably "got less education".

Bersih held its third and largest protest on April 28 which turned rowdy after police charged at thousands of protesters.

The protest was also joined by smaller groups in 51 other nations.

Leaders from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government, including Najib, have repeatedly painted Bersih's most recent rally last April 28 as an attempt to oust its democratically-elected government, a charge the movement's leader Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan has denied just as frequently.

Bersih has been lobbying the Najib administration to enforce electoral reforms, including cleaning the voter roll of dubious entries, before the next national polls due in nine months.

Putrajaya has pledged to undertake the reforms after last year's massive July 9 rally garnered negative publicity for the Najib administration around the world, but the authorities have been accused of dragging their feet over their implementation, which the Election Commission (EC) said will take time.

Ambiga also accused the BN coalition of relentlessly "demonising" the electoral watchdog, with the latest incident seeing anti-Bersih flyers bearing the Information, Communication and Culture Ministry's official logo being distributed around the Klang Valley.

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