

**Legal status not absolution, Nazri tells Bersih**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, July 25 — Bersih leaders should not feel vindicated by the court ruling on the group's legal status, said Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz, who pointed out that the electoral reforms coalition had still violated the law with its rallies.

The de facto law minister said while the High Court's decision should be respected, Bersih leaders must be reminded that the ruling did not legalise their past actions.

"They must know the difference. The court only decided that they are not an unlawful society," Nazri told The Malaysian Insider last night.

"But that does not mean that they did not break the law in the past," he added.

The Umno minister said Bersih had violated the now-repealed Section 27 of the Police Act for organising an illegal rally in July 9 last year, while it breached provisions in the Peaceful Assembly Act 2011 with this year's April 28 event.

Bersih leaders whooped with joy yesterday after the Kuala Lumpur High Court overturned Putrajaya's order last year declaring the group illegal, claiming the decision vindicated their struggle for electoral reform.

Prominent lawyer-activist Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, who co-heads the 82-member group, told The Malaysian Insider she was "delighted" with the decision, adding that it tallies with her understanding of the law.

Bersih has held three public demonstrations so far since 2007 to push for a cleaner polls process and a more impartial Election Commission (EC), which critics have accused of being manipulated by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN).

Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein had last year declared the loose Bersih pact illegal and a widespread crackdown on its members and supporters ensued, resulting in the arrest of over 1,600 people before and during the July 9 rally in the city.

Putrajaya's heavy-handed tactics, however, earned the Najib administration international condemnation after footage of alleged police violence spread across the Internet. This forced the government to quickly move to contain the damage.

Apart from setting up a parliamentary select committee (PSC) to look into Bersih's reform demands, Datuk Seri Najib Razak's Cabinet also introduced the Peaceful Assembly Act 2011 to allow for public gatherings, a major milestone in the prime minister's leadership.

But the new Act prohibits "assemblies in motion", which the April 28 rally or "Bersih 3.0" had turned into, as well as mass gatherings at areas not gazetted for "peaceful assemblies".

The police had obtained a court order just before the April 28 event, blocking protesters from entering Dataran Merdeka, the chosen venue for the protest.

But in the heat of the event, a highly-charged group of thousands broke through the barricades despite calls from Ambiga and other event organisers to abide by the order and stay outside the cordoned-off zone.

This resulted in over four hours of chaos as riot police shot tear gas canisters and chemical-laced water to disperse the crowd while those on foot were chased down alleyways through the city.

Scores were injured in the process while trade was lost, public property damaged and the streets of Kuala Lumpur ended up strewn with bottles, clothes, shoes and broken concrete slabs.

"So this ruling does not at all vindicate Bersih. There is a fine difference here.

"They broke laws — the Police Act, the Peaceful Assembly Act. They cannot say that they were right," Nazri said.

He reminded the polls watchdog that despite the High Court ruling yesterday, the government could still exercise its legal right to appeal the decision.

"It is up to the Home Ministry. Every aggrieved party, regardless who they are, has the right to appeal," he said.

Bersih told Putrajaya last night not to appeal the decision, and instead return all the materials it confiscated last year when the group was declared unlawful.

They also asked that the government withdraw all civil suits against it in court, saying it was a waste of public funds.

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