

Ambiga, Bersih crew to pass baton to new leadership soon
Malaysian Insider
May 21, 2013
BY CLARA CHOOI

KUALA LUMPUR, May 21 — Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan and the rest of Bersih 2.0's 20-member steering committee are soon expected to relinquish their posts to make way for new blood in the leadership of the polls watchdog movement.

The coalition for free and fair elections will then organise internal elections among its 84-member organisations to select new representatives to lead the movement, now hailed as an internationally-renowned pressure group for electoral reforms.

Ambiga confirmed with The Malaysian Insider yesterday that "there will be changes in the committee" once a proper mechanism is put in place to elect Bersih 2.0's new leadership.

"The finer points have yet to be ironed out. But I can tell you for certain that there will be changes in the committee.

"I have always believed in the principles of having a limited term in any office... and we speak so much about democracy so we must practise it.

"We believe in the importance of rejuvenation and that you must pass the baton on," she said when contacted.

"There are so many wonderful, capable people out there who have proven their mettle, proven how committed they are... I am very sure we will not be short of capable leaders," she added.

Ambiga acknowledged that Bersih 2.0 is not a formally-registered society with the Registrar of Societies (RoS) but said there was no need to do so as a coalition of legal bodies.

"We are not a society, we are a coalition. It is legal," she said.

Ambiga said the movement believes in the importance of rejuvenation and 'that you must pass the baton on'. Ambiga added that it has yet to be confirmed how the coalition would conduct its internal polls to determine the new leadership of Bersih 2.0, but promised it would be a democratic process that would see all member organisations fairly represented.

She noted that it was out of respect for democracy that the coalition's key members will soon vacate their posts to make way for others.

But when asked for a specific date for the expiry of the current committee's term, Ambiga admitted that it was yet to be decided.

She noted that the current committee has been busy handling issues surrounding the just-concluded May 5 polls, and was committed to complete the work it had started.

Bersih 2.0 will be establishing a "People's Tribunal" to hear complaints of electoral irregularities from the May 5 polls and is expected to come up with recommendations and findings that it plans to forward to the relevant authorities, Ambiga said.

"I do wish we could leave sooner rather than later and it is not about abandoning ship, but about rejuvenation.

"However, the committee wants to finish up some of the work that it has started. Once we are done with this tribunal, then we will be ready to hand over the reins to our successors," she said.

Bersih first started out as the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform, formed in July 2005 with the objective to push for thorough reforms to the country's polls process.

The group was formally launched on November 23, 2006, in Parliament, in an event attended by key political leaders, civil societies and NGOs, including PKR president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng and other notable leaders.

It organised its first mass rally for free and fair elections in 2007, a massive gathering that was later credited for Barisan Nasional's (BN) colossal losses in the 2008 general election.

The tumultuous polls saw the ruling pact lose its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority and four states to opposition parties PKR, the DAP and PAS, which later went on to form the federal opposition pact Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

Ambiga, a renowned lawyer, civil rights activist and former Bar Council president, was lifted to the post of Bersih chairman towards the end of 2010 and led the group to hold its second mass rally calling for free and fair elections the following year in July 2011.

The event, which resulted in running street battles and violent clashes between riot police and civilians, earned the Najib administration condemnation in the international media, and has been credited for the sudden whirlwind of legislative reforms that the first-term prime minister mooted in the months after the rally.

In the span of two Dewan Rakyat sittings and about six months, the government pushed through a record number of critical amendments to preventive laws long described as draconian by civil society groups and those in the opposition camp.

Key among these was the repeal of the Internal Security Act (ISA), the 1960 anti-Communist insurgency law which critics have accused the government of misusing to threaten and quell opposition dissent.

I do wish we could leave sooner rather than later and it is not about abandoning ship, but about rejuvenation. — Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan

A new legislation, the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act, was proposed in its place, removing the government's power under the ISA to throw a person behind bars for up to two years without trial.

In November 2011, both Houses of Parliament also approved the Peaceful Assembly Act 2011, a fresh law mooted by the government to permit public gatherings after the authorities arrested over 1,600 individuals and sprayed tear gas and chemical-laced water to disperse Bersih 2.0's peaceful July 9 rally that year.

Another reformist move taken by the Najib government was to form the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) for electoral reforms in October 2011, tasking it to look into key

demands made by Bersih and opposition lawmakers on how to clean up the election process.

But when its six-month tenure was up, the bipartisan panel tabled on April 2, 2012 what Ambiga and PR representatives described as a report lacking in true reform to the many discrepancies they have uncovered in the electoral roll.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his team earned plus points for daring to slacken the government's leash over civil freedom, a historical point in Malaysian politics, but at a time when tempers were running high over his government's handling of the July 2011 rally, the prime minister's failed attempt at electoral reform earned him harsh comments from a large segment of the Malaysian middle ground, including young and first-time voters and the middle to upper classes.

On April 28, 2012, Bersih 2.0 organised its third rally calling for electoral reform in yet another event that resulted in chaos and violence on the streets, where tens of thousands of Malaysians turned up in a massive show of force to protest against a voter roll allegedly filled with irregularities and a polling process deemed too open to fraud.

But when Bersih 2.0 leaders found that even their final mammoth gathering had failed to result in the reforms that it has been demanding for, the group proceeded to hire its own civilian observers and launched a nationwide campaign to encourage all Malaysians to come out in droves on Polling Day.

The result was a record 84 per cent voter turnout during the May 5 polls and hundreds of reports from civilian observers nationwide claiming to be in possession of what they believe to be proof of phantom voters and alleged attempts by agents of the ruling BN to cheat their way to victory.

BN emerged victors again after the stiff polls contest, earning 133 seats to PR's 89 seats in the 222-seat Parliament, seven seats fewer than its total score in Election 2008.

PR has announced plans to file election petitions to challenge the results in at least 27 federal seats where BN had won with marginal victories while Bersih 2.0 expects to establish its "People's Tribunal" within two or three weeks' time.

Hakcipta © 2013 The Malaysian Insider

Source:

<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/ambiga-bersih-team-to-resign-soon-to-make-way-for-new-leadership/>