

EC denies Malaysia's voting system will keep BN in power forever
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By Amin Iskandar

PUTRAJAYA, May 27 — The Election Commission (EC) has denied claims that the first-past-the-post voting system practised in Malaysia will keep the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) in power forever, while insisting that it is among the best electoral systems in the world.

Academics have said malapportionment — unequally-sized constituencies — and gerrymandering — manipulation of electoral boundaries — have led to one rural vote being equal to six urban votes in the May 5 general election where Pakatan Rakyat (PR) won the popular vote but BN got to form the government.

"This first past the post, it's not until forever that BN will win. This first past the post is a simple system where (there's a) contest for seats in an area," the EC deputy chairman Datuk Wan Ahmad Wan Omar told The Malaysian Insider in an exclusive interview.

"Because of this first past the post, BN did not get two-thirds majority in PRU13 (13th general election). Because of this first past the post, the Selangor Pakatan Rakyat (PR) government won with two-thirds majority in the state assembly (DUN)," he added.

According to Wan Ahmad, the electoral system used in Malaysia is also used by developed countries that have been practising democracy for a long time.

"Britain, already a few hundred years practising democracy, until now it uses first past the post.

Wan Ahmad said those who feel the first-past-the-post voting system is unfair do not understand the electoral system in Malaysia. "Australia, first past the post. New Zealand first past the post mixed a bit with the proportional representation (PR) system. India, the largest democratic country in the world, 800 million voters, first past the post," he said.

The EC deputy chairman said it would not be possible for PR to win so many seats, including a few states, if the "first-past-the-post" system was unfair.

"Because of this first past the post, Kelantan was ruled by one party only, PAS for 25 years. In Penang, DAP won in all the seats it contested. I feel that those who make these statements do not understand the electoral system in Malaysia," Wan Ahmad said.

PR currently rules the three states of Kelantan, Penang, Selangor after it recently lost its one-term PAS-led administration in Kedah to BN and failed to recapture Perak.

In a forum in Petaling Jaya last Wednesday, Universiti Malaya Centre for Democracy and Elections (Umcedel) deputy director Amer Saifude had said BN will continue its rule as long as the first-past-the-post system is used in Malaysia despite a redelineation exercise.

The academic had said the expected redelineation of constituencies by year-end would benefit Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's coalition and even better its Election 2013 performance.

"History has shown that every time there is a re-demarcation process, BN would perform better," Amer had said.

Despite winning only 47 per cent of the popular vote in the May 5 elections, Najib saw his coalition keeping the government with a simple majority, bagging 133 federal seats against PR's 89.

Amer had pointed out that Najib was the first BN chief to score a weaker mandate in his maiden bid for power, a reflection of the faulty fundamentals of the first-past-the-post system.

The Umcedel deputy director had said the system's glaring defect could be seen in how BN, bar a few exceptions, had never won the popular vote by more than 60 per cent but yet managed to win a huge number of the seats it contested in.

He had also highlighted how several constituencies nationwide had been gerrymandered without reasonable justifications.

"Sometimes you see the re-demarcation is illogical and unfair... the redelineation process is often made to serve the interest of certain parties," he had said.

Amer had however noted that any move to redraw the constituencies must first have the consent of at least half of the members of the Dewan Rakyat.

PR federal lawmakers have signalled their intention to make full use of their increased parliamentary numbers to ensure constituencies are fairly redrawn when the EC kicks off the redelineation exercise this year-end.

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