

## **With Bersih, Malaysians overseas taking interest in country's progress**

**Malaysian Insider**

**Aug 30 , 2013**

**BY GEORGE CHANG, SPECIAL TO THE MALAYSIAN INSIDER**

Malaysians overseas have become more organised and involved in political developments back home with the Bersih movement playing a pivotal role in engaging them, a top Malaysian academic said in a seminar in Melbourne.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin also said in the seminar that he believed the ever-growing Malaysian diaspora wants to be part of the process in bringing about change in the country.

"There is this awakened diaspora. They have been silent for a long, long time in relation to Malaysian politics. After 1998 (onset of Reformasi), for the first time, they found a voice they can share with," he said.

Shamsul said this when speaking at the seminar on "Malaysian politics goes global: the formation of the Malaysian opposition global diaspora" organised by Monash Asia Institute and held at the Malaysian Consulate-General in Melbourne last week.

He said that the depth of the support of both students and Malaysian residents at the various Bersih rallies in major cities throughout the globe is indicative of their enthusiasm and awareness of the domestic situation.

He noted that Bersih's issues-based campaigns have struck a cord with the diaspora disillusioned with the state of affairs in Malaysia – their latent grievances range from abuse of power, corruption and education to racism and civil rights.

"For me, the importance of the diaspora cannot be seen as passing phenomenon. I think it is a permanent one."

He said although "they have minimal impact voting-wise, their news value is very high" as the generic issues raised by Bersih and the diaspora draw considerable international attention, "so never under-rate this group and its impact".

While Pakatan Rakyat (PR) leaders have been actively courting Malaysians abroad, Shamsul, who is also the deputy chair of the Malaysian National Professors' Council, said there has been no clear strategy or response from the government – much to the frustration of Barisan Nasional (BN) supporters.

PAS was the latest from PR to reach out to the wider diaspora in Australia with former Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Nizar Jamaluddin leading a delegation to Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne last month to raise funds for its general election petitions.

Only a few of those who attended the forum chaired by Praveen Nagappan, of Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia Melbourne chapter, were Muslims. A delegation official told The Malaysian Insider that they were pleased with the response and donations.

Nizar's oratorical skills in English and presentation of PAS as a moderate force impressed and probably persuaded the crowd to part with their money.

The number of Malaysians moving to Australia has increased considerably, jumping from about 1,350 a year in the 1970s to about 5,400 annually (from 2006 to 2011).

The 2011 census shows that 116,196 permanent residents/citizens were born in Malaysia and 7,224 (4,200 in the 2006 census) of them declared Islam as their religion.

The anti-establishment character of the diaspora may not be a permanent one and this is emphasised by Shamsul, who said they could be used as a "platform by anyone", regardless of whether they are in PR or BN.

The diaspora could become an "important political capital" for factions within the political parties who have connections with family and friends, and investments overseas, in short people and funds they can count on for their cause.

"They have invested money overseas but we don't know how much of this is flowing back to Malaysia (to fund campaigns) like the Sikhs in Canada who send money back to Punjab for their movement," Shamsul said.

"This is something Malaysian politics (and academia) has never addressed, or even consider it as worthy of analysis." - August 30, 2013.

\* George Chang is a writer and media researcher in Melbourne.

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