

**Why Bersih 4 matters more in East Malaysia than in KL**  
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In East Malaysia, where electoral fraud and abuse are “normal”, the numbers in a Bersih rally matter, even if crowds in Sarawak and Sabah are a tiny fraction of the hordes that choked Kuala Lumpur over the weekend, said rally organisers and analysts.

They matter, said the organisers and analysts, simply because the people who have suffered the most from the country’s flawed elections are finally standing up to demand changes in how their politicians behave.

Getting 5,000 rally goers in Kuching or 3,000 in Kota Kinabalu is no small feat given how Sarawakian and Sabahan Barisan Nasional (BN) politicians treat them.

Supporting a non-BN outfit such as Bersih 2.0, who is the main organiser of the Bersih 4 rally over the weekend, can cost a voter much needed aid or infrastructure from a BN elected rep.

East Malaysians are also unsure of their basic rights.

In Kota Kinabalu, Bersih 4 organisers had not set a turnout target number because they were afraid that police and City Hall would scare an already cowed population from showing up.

That 3,000 people showed up on the first day of Sabah’s Bersih rally despite police warnings were beyond the organisers’ expectations and signalled a shift in mindset that could affect how Sabahans vote in the next election.

As election watchdog member Ong BK said, rural voters are the key to political change in Malaysia and getting a good turnout in Sarawak and Sabah for Bersih is more important than a huge turnout in the peninsula.

**Spreading the Bersih message**

In the Peninsular, said Ong, of the Malaysian Election Observers Network (Meonet), awareness of Bersih and its aims of electoral reform are over-saturated but it needs to be spread in East Malaysia.

Some of that awareness, said Sandakan resident Oting Enchi, is already there and it is starting with the state capitals of East Malaysia, which is why there were good crowds in Kuching and Kota Kinabalu.

For instance, Oting said, more and more Sabahans are learning about the nefarious practice of giving out identity cards to foreigners to vote and this has skewed election results in Sabah.

The Sabah Bersih rally was also a demonstration that government funds and amenities should belong to the public and who gets them cannot depend on what party that person voted for.

"So even 3,000 coming to the rally is important. The message of Bersih is being heard in KK and it will be brought to the villages," said Oting, who came to the rally with three of his friends.

Another Bersih supporter Richard Limbunadou is optimistic that Bersih's messages about voters' rights and clean government will get to the heartland despite the lack of alternative media and the dominance of BN-controlled television and newspapers.

"The young are fully conscious of Sabah's problems and are aware of Bersih. They will bring these things back to their parents."

The fact that the Kuching and Kota Kinabalu rallies were festive, peaceful affairs also helped Bersih's image among East Malaysians. said Batu Lintang assemblyman See Chee How.

"The peaceful gathering conforms to Sarawakians' nature. It was peaceful and positive," said See, who is Sarawak PKR vice-chairman.

### **Vote value**

See does not think that the rallies in East Malaysia or Kuala Lumpur will bring Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak down. At the most, it will pile even more pressure on him.

What is more important, said Ong, is that more and more East Malaysians are educated on their rights as voters and citizens so that they can resist abuse, which is already second nature for Peninsular voters.

In the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, effective political change involved empowering marginalised parts of the populace such as rural folk as well as the urban middle class, he said.

In Thailand for instance, the two biggest rivals, the Pheu Thai and the Democrats have both urban and rural vote bases, he said. Both parties can monitor the other for instances of gerrymandering and abuse in all constituencies.

Since the Malaysian opposition has tended to focus on the peninsula urban middle class and is weak in East Malaysia, they have suffered the effects of electoral fraud, Ong said.

"In terms of value, the East Malaysian rural voter is at the top, so Bersih and the opposition should give more priority to educating them," said Ong, explaining a rough hierarchy of a vote is worth.

Since it takes less East Malaysian rural voters to elect one state or parliamentary representative compared to a peninsular voter who lives in a big constituency, a rural vote is higher in value.

By bringing its message to East Malaysian state capitals, Bersih's organisers have started the process of empowering the rural voters. – August 31, 2015.

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