

Malacca polls seen as balance between preserving democratic rights and ensuring safety



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10- 29- 2021 10:30 AM

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PETALING JAYA: The Malacca election has highlighted a need for a balance between democratic principles on one side and health and safety needs on the other.

Those with political interests have decried the decision of the Health Ministry to impose a ban on open campaigning to prevent a surge in Covid-19 infections.

On the other hand, medical experts want tight controls in place to ensure Malaysia

On the other hand, medical experts want tight controls in place to ensure Malaysia does not see another "wildfire" the likes of Sabah.

The snap election in Sabah in September last year led to a surge in infections across the country as voters travelled home to cast their votes and then returned to other states where they live and work.

Election watchdog group Bersih 2.0 chairman Thomas Fann described the outright ban on physical gatherings as "unreasonable and inconsistent", given that under the National Recovery Plan (NRP), Malacca is already in Phase Four of the recovery process.

Under this phase, public places such as malls and restaurants have reopened for business.

He said the standard operating procedures (SOP) for the election should be in line with the NRP, with social gatherings allowed but subject to 50% capacity and social distancing.

He added that the penalty for violating the SOP during elections should also be in line with provisions under the NRP, regardless of party affiliation.

Fann was commenting on a RM10,000 fine imposed on Barisan Nasional over a recent mass gathering at the World Trade Centre Kuala Lumpur.

The Health Ministry shared a snapshot of the compound issued to the executive secretary of the coalition for violating the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988.

The Malaysian United Democratic Alliance has also been penalised for holding a press conference on the Malacca election.

Fann said political parties should be able to comply with the SOP if given the chance.

"If they are found wanting, then compounds should be issued," he said, adding that disallowing any form of physical campaigning without providing a viable alternative such as equitable coverage in government-owned media is a suppression of the rights of candidates and voters to express themselves.

"A total ban is likely to give the ruling coalition an unfair advantage as it has access to the broadcast and print media, and also as in the past, many campaigns are done in the name of discharging official duties," he pointed out.

"This would render the conduct of the election unfair and the outcome lacking legitimacy. What we need are clearer guidelines from the Election Commission and fair enforcement of the SOP on the ground."

Former deputy health minister Dr Lee Boon Chye agreed that SOP for elections should be consistent with those in the NRP.

“If there is an imbalance in the SOP, then it can be seen as politically motivated. Slap those who violate the SOP with fines in accordance with the law, regardless of party and carry out routine screening on those who are involved in campaigning to curb the risk of cross-transmission,” he told theSun.

However, Lee agreed that there is no “safe” number of attendees for gatherings.

“There will always be gatherings, not just political ones. Every party should submit a list of those who will be present so that routine screening can be done,” he said.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Koh Kar Chai stood by the government’s decision to ban all physical campaigning.

“MMA notes with dismay the continued flouting of the SOP. After one and a half years of the pandemic, there should no longer be any difficulty in adhering to the SOP,” he said.

“It underlines the fact that those who can afford the fines will continue to treat the law with disdain. But worse is that certain politicians who wish to earn the support of voters are not even willing to lead by example.”

He suggested higher fines be imposed on politicians and political parties for SOP violations.

“As long as it does not dent their massive election budget, it will not be effective.”

Apart from that, he said those who attend political gatherings should be reported to the authorities.

“The authorities should also be informed if a banner promoting a political talk appears so that they can stop the organisers from proceeding.”

Koh added that even if a mini or scaled down gathering is allowed, it could eventually snowball to a huge crowd.

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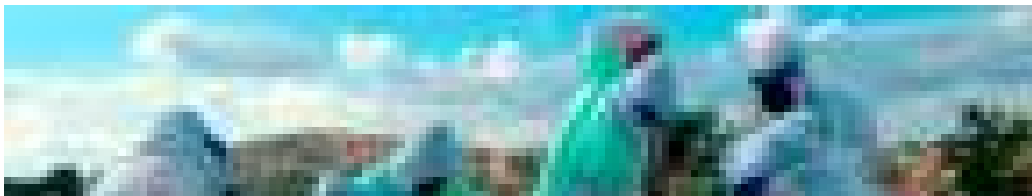


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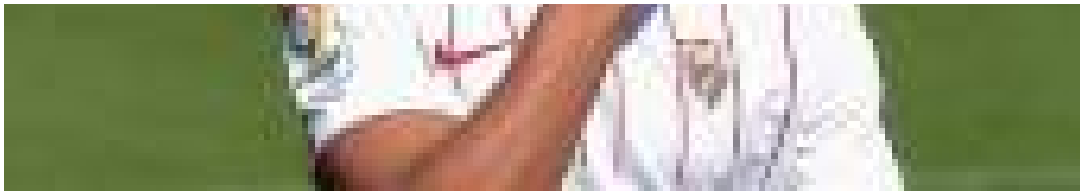
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