

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Malaysia: Government Must Stop Threats and Harassment, and Allow BERSIH 3.0 Rally to Proceed without Disruptions

(Bangkok, 27 April 2012): The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), a regional human rights group representing 49 non-governmental organisations across Asia, has urged the Malaysian government to respect the fundamental right to peaceful assembly by allowing a rally to demand for electoral reforms in Malaysia, scheduled to be held on 28 April 2012, to proceed without any disruptions.

The rally, dubbed BERSIH 3.0, organised by polls reform group BERSIH, is held in response to the lack of progress in the electoral reforms following a similar rally organised by the same group last year.

FORUM-ASIA denounced the government's threats against the organisers, including a warning by the Home Minister on 26 April 2012 that the government will use all necessary means to prevent the rally.

On 20 April 2012, the police arrested Tan Hon Kai, an intern at Malaysian human rights group SUARAM, allegedly for trespassing, while he was putting up a BERSIH 3.0 poster in Penang. Meanwhile, another seven were detained briefly for questioning by the police for distributing BERSIH 3.0 flyers in Kuala Lumpur on 25 April 2012. Furthermore, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall has also raided the protest camps set up at Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) by activists and students, who are demanding for free tertiary education and are set to camp at the venue until 28 April 2012 to converge with the BERSIH 3.0 rally. Six students and activists have been arrested to this day since they set up their camps on 14 April 2012. The Kuala Lumpur mayor has warned that the Kuala Lumpur City Hall would act against participants in the BERSIH 3.0 rally in a similar manner as it did with the students.

"These developments leading up to the BERSIH event, which include arrests and harsh warnings, are totally unwarranted and deplorable. The government's responses also suggest a disturbing likelihood of a harsh crackdown by the government on the rally tomorrow. Given the dismal track record of the government in responding to public assemblies, we fear that another crackdown is imminent," warned Yap Swee Seng, FORUM-ASIA's executive director.

A similar rally held last year on 9 July 2011, also organised by BERSIH, was met with violence by the police, who deployed teargas and water cannons, and arrested more than 1,500 individuals.

FORUM-ASIA stressed that all previous rallies and events organised by BERSIH had been peaceful, and noted that the upcoming rally will be a major test for the government's commitment to protecting fundamental human rights, particularly in the application of the newly-enacted Peaceful Assembly Act 2012.

"The new legislation is purportedly intended to allow assemblies that are peaceful in nature. Notwithstanding our criticisms of this new law, the government's claims remain to be validated. The government should view the BERSIH 3.0 rally as an excellent opportunity to make good its commitment, based on the good track record of BERSIH as an organisation, as well as the Minister's own admission that the organisers would not pose a threat to security," said Yap.

Yap also stressed, "As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Malaysia has made commitments to the protection of human rights in various fora on numerous occasions. If the government does not intend to make a mockery of its own international commitments, it must allow the rally to proceed without any disruptions, and ensure that the police facilitates the rally in compliance with international human rights standards."

“The government should also instruct the Federal government-appointed Kuala Lumpur City Hall to immediately remove the steel barricades mounted at the venue of the rally since last night,” added Yap.

For inquiries, please contact:

1. Mr. Yap Swee Seng, FORUM-ASIA, Executive Director, +66818689178, yap@forum-asia.org
2. Mr. John Liu, FORUM-ASIA, East Asia Programme Officer, +66802828610, johnliu@forum-asia.org