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People coming together can define democracy: Malaysian award winner

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[Maria Chin Abdullah](#)

Taipei, Dec. 10 (CNA) The civil society movements in Malaysia have shown that people can band together to "define democracy," without allowing themselves to be intimidated by any state repression, leaders of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections said Saturday.

The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, known as Bersih 2.0, is a coalition of nongovernmental organizations in Malaysia championing free, clean and fair elections.

The government in Malaysia has been in power since the country gained independence from Britain in 1957 and has been accused in some quarters of manipulating the electoral system.

"What we have been doing is really about defining democracy," Maria Chin Abdullah, chairperson of Bersih 2.0 told CNA in an interview after she arrived in Taiwan to accept 2017 Asian Democracy and Human Rights Award on behalf of Bersih 2.0.

Over the course of the 10 years since Bersih was first established in 2006, it has used very simple messages to build public support, Maria said.

"We gave the message in a very simple way," she said. "If you want accountability, transparency, and a better government, you need to step up. We are actually telling people that you are part and parcel of this process of defining democracy."

Since its formation, Bersih has staged five massive rallies to make demands for electoral and institutional reforms, one of which is to address the alleged problems of gerrymandering and malapportionment.

According to Bersih 2.0, in the last general election in 2013, the 60-year-old ruling Barisan Nasional won 47 percent of the votes but took 60 percent of the parliamentary seats as a result of a skewed re-delineation that stacks up seats in the rural heartlands in favor of a particular political party.

Through the civil movements, "we have defined that people matter, institutions matter, because institutions are the ones supposed to deliver justice," Maria said. "If you don't deliver justice, we will respond to you. We also define that people can come together to define for themselves what they want as a government."

Over the years, Maria said, the calls for reforms have been gaining traction, with the Bersih rallies drawing up to 100,000 people.

"We are very confident that this is our base, our staunch supporters," she said

With the strong public support, Bersih has sued the government over its repressive measures "to force them to respond." According to Bersih Manager Mandeep Singh, the group has won almost 80 percent of the cases, which he said disproves the government's allegation that the group is illegal. Nonetheless, the government has continued its relentless crackdown on Bersih, he said.

"Thousands of people were detained before," Singh said. "People have lost their jobs and were beaten up just because they believe in fighting for free and fair elections, they believe in democratic governance and institutional reforms."

The government's actions towards Bersih went beyond repressive measures to include mobilization of the "red shirt" movement to harass supporters of the Bersih movement in the fifth rally staged last year, he said.

This is because the government is getting very worried Bersih has been reaching out to places that used to be the heartland of the ruling coalition, Maria said.

The government sent in the "red shirts," then the demands made by Bersih for free elections and clean government "were suppressed by the media" and it "became a fight between yellow (Bersih) and red shirts," Maria said.



Maria Chin Abdullah (middle), Shahrul Aman Mohd Saari (right), and Mandeep Singh (left) display flyers of Bersih on Saturday in Taipei.

"It seemed that the tear gas and water cannons laced with chemicals already used in the previous rallies were not enough," she said. "So they used violence."

Shahrul Aman Mohd Saari, deputy chairperson of Bersih,

said in the interview that the Malaysian people know "they can't just keep quiet."

"When people stay quiet, that is when dictatorial regimes flourish and democracy takes a back seat," he said. "When we started, we were very small. When we link to the people, the power of the people prevails in the end."

As they have all experienced, the leaders of Bersih said, human rights defenders are subject to all kinds of intimidation in Malaysia every day.

"But the wonderful part about Malaysia is that the people are not frightened by the violence," Maria said. "They actually get very angry and come out much stronger."

(By Shih Hsiu-chuan)

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