

Press Release from BERSIH (26 November 2021): PRN Sarawak: Sarawakians Have the Right to a Fair Election So That Democracy Continues to Flourish in Sarawak

After the State Election (PRN) of Melaka ended, now once again the focus of the whole country is on the PRN Sarawak which was announced by the Election Commission (EC) a few days ago. The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) closely followed the announcement by the EC.

BERSIH expresses serious concern on the campaign period which is too short with only 12 days as announced by the EC for the previous PRN Melaka and now for the PRN Sarawak. Sarawak is the largest state and has the largest number of DUNs in Malaysia. Such a short campaign period will not do justice to the voters involved and the candidates who are contesting. For the record, the by-elections held after the 14th General Election (GE14) and the PRN Sabah were all allocated 14 days or more for the campaign period. The ideal period for campaigning time is at least 21 days for the PRN Sarawak this time so that postal votes can reach the ballot box in time and candidates and political parties have more time to campaign in this highly controlled situation under the pandemic.

Although polling day falls on a Saturday, there are still many companies, organisations or individuals who will be still working on that day. BERSIH calls on the Sarawak Government to declare the polling day on December 18 as a Special Public Holiday, as done by the Melaka State Government to make it convenient for voters to come out to cast their votes.

BERSIH also proposes that at least one special polling station be set up in each state to allow Sarawak voters who are living in those states to cast their votes without having to fly back to Sarawak. There are an estimated 250,000 Sarawakians living in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah. A recent check on the flight tickets to Sarawak from the Peninsula is almost RM3,000. This is extremely unfair for Sarawak voters, especially the majority that can't afford such expensive travel expenses, as they would be deprived of their right to vote. It is also impossible for voters to commute twice in a short period of time as Christmas Day falls the following week.

BERSIH urges that the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) be thoroughly reviewed so that the SOP that does not make sense like in the PRN Melaka will no longer be repeated in Sarawak PRN. Given geographical factors, lack of infrastructure and very limited access to information in Sarawak, especially in the rural and suburbs, face-to-face campaigning is a need and has to be allowed. Contesting candidates have the right to communicate campaign information to their voters. Meanwhile, for the voters to make an informed decision in the election, the government through the EC, the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) and the National Security Council (NSC), must issue a new SOP that is fairer to all in order to create a level playing field. The SOP should be issued as early as possible before the Nomination Day so that all parties involved have sufficient preparation time.

Finally, BERSIH also urges that government-owned television channels such as RTM and TVS to offer fair access to media air time to all candidates and political parties that will be contesting in the Sarawak PRN. This will help level the playing field, especially for the candidates who have less resources in their disposal to convey their campaign messages to voters.

The 12th PRN Sarawak must be run freely and fairly to ensure a bright and democratic future for the rakyat of Sarawak.

Released by:

The Steering Committee of BERSIH