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Appeal for local elections

I BELIEVE many Malaysians were taken aback by the unexpected announcement of our Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammed, after the rally on Saturday to protest the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Icerd), that local council elections would not be held.

The people are asking why and for how long will they be denied to vote for their local council representatives.

The PM also did not give a full explanation or provide any deep justification for the removal of such a fundamental right of the people in any democracy and for denying our democracy the chance to mature and develop further. Hence, the prompt press statement by Gabungan Bertindak Malaysia (GBM) on Tuesday titled "Start Village Elections to Allay Malays Fear" was most welcome.

But here again, why do we assume that we need to "start with village elections to allay Malays' fear"? This is not only an important Malay issue but also a national Malaysian matter! It relates to all races in Malaysia and is not exclusive to any group, so why do we need to differentiate Malays from non-Malays in this vital aspect of democracy and good governance at the grassroots level?

However, as GBM has rightly pointed out, the "absence of local elections is harming the interests of Malays who now make up the majority in most cities and towns." I would add that non-Malays will also suffer and lose out from not having local council elections.

Actually, all Malaysians will suffer from

not having local council elections for the following reasons:

1. Malaysian citizens' human right, fundamental freedom and the basic need to enjoy the right to vote for his/her representative at the very foundation of our democracy – at grassroots level – will be denied. Is that what we Malaysians need or want? Hence, we need a thorough clarification by the government to explain why our basic right to local council elections will continue to be rejected in the new Malaysia.

2. It's contradictory to encourage general elections and seek to improve the Election Commission while rejecting local council elections. Would the same logic be used someday to reject general elections? Would some leaders use the argument of the fear of ethnic conflicts to reject general elections when it is politically expedient?

3. How does racial consideration factor in whether we have or we reject local council elections? Are there no racial feelings shown at the ballot box for the federal and state elections that have been generally carried out freely and fairly for 14 elections since our independence? So why are racial considerations now being used as reasons for rejecting local council elections?

4. We all know that the quality of public and community services provided by local government councils is not first rate. We are also aware that local problems like poor garbage collection, street lighting, transport, clogged drainage, dirty wet market facilities and conditions, the neglect of the environ-

ment and inefficiencies are characteristics of local governments. Elected, not appointed, local council officials would be more accountable to the residents. If they are unsuitable or corrupt, they can be thrown out of office. There can be better checks and balance on their performance to make them serve the public better.

5. The public and especially the voters need more and better justification for the new government's rejection of local council elections in the interest of good governance and fairness. We have been looking forward to more transparency, integrity, efficiency, national unity and closer collaboration between the new government and the rakyat and we hope to get it!

The rakyat's legitimate and high expectations will be badly let down if the new government's unfortunate and sudden decision to reject local council elections are not met with more explanations, justifications and care. So, like many or most Malaysians, I appeal to the government to review the decision to reject local council elections.

Alternately, the government can postpone the holding of local council elections within a limited period – but please hold them well before the 15th general election.

We can start the election process early with kampung elections as thoughtfully proposed by the GBM.



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