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Our students abroad keep abreast with developments back home

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MALAYSIAN students abroad may be physically absent from their homeland but for the majority, being out of sight need not necessarily mean out of mind.

Many are steadfast about keeping in touch with developments back home, via the Internet, newspapers or the proverbial university grapevine.

Political developments in the country are, to the majority of students, particularly interesting, but due to the deluge of information from various sources, the truth can sometimes be less than clear.

The Leeds Umno Club adviser Azhali Baharun had said that Malaysian students were at times confused by various reports on the country in the foreign media.

"This makes it difficult for us to put matters in perspective for other Malaysians and also foreign students curious about the country's developments," Azhali told journalists on a tour of UK universities recently.

What are these students curious about? "The Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue for one. Also why the Barisan Nasional lost in the recent Lunas by-election and the oil royalty issue," said Azhali.

It will definitely not be in the country's interests if students are confused for they then become easy prey for those who seek to use them for their own needs, or in the words of the Prime Minister, sow seeds of hatred in them against the Government.

It has been reported that Hizbi Clubs, set up by Pas, are attracting students overseas.

In Ireland, for instance, new students would be met at the airport by Hizbi members and taken care of from the start of their stay until the very end.

Clifford Chieng, who is pursuing his BA (Econs) at the University of Manchester acknowledges this.

"We have seen members of the Opposition visiting students here in the residential halls. During the last general election in Malaysia, Opposition flags were flying all over the campus.

"I recently received an anonymous telephone call urging me to help a group of students put up reformasi posters around the city. But I did not want to be involved."

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in Manchester recently to deliver a talk to Malaysian students.

But things are apparently changing. The shroud of confusion enveloping Malaysian students abroad over political developments back home is slowly lifting.

Azhali attributed this to the more frequent visits by Malaysian leaders to Britain to meet students. This has helped them gain an insight into current political developments.

"The Umno Clubs in the UK, welcome more visits from Malaysian leaders."

He said Umno Clubs were pleased that the leaders have changed their approach.

"Previously, they seemed aloof and distant, and met us only in posh hotels. Now, they come to our residential halls and universities to hold informal discussions with us."

Azhali, however, urged the leaders to leave their camcorders and tape recorders back in Malaysia. He spoke of one recent visit where students

were afraid to speak up because the visitor came armed with recording devices.

"What is the purpose of bringing such devices if it is only an informal discussion? Students will fear opening up if they see that the session is being taped."

Lim Hooi Been, an electrical and electronic engineering student at the University of Sheffield, said students now rarely "got emotional" over political developments in Malaysia.

"We talk and discuss various issues with other Malaysian students but it is not something we get emotional over ... our studies are the bigger priority."

University of Leeds liaison office head of international and schools David Baker agrees that the average Malaysian student in the UK was generally more focused on his or her studies rather than the political goings-on back home.

"They realise that a large investment has been made in their studies and dabbling in politically-flavoured activities are a distraction.

"They are aware that their parents have spent a large sum of money to send them abroad for higher education, and those on scholarship realise the huge investment that has been made."

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