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Universities a place to study, not partake in politics, demonstrations

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WHEN opening Universiti Malaysia Sabah's main campus in Kota Kinabalu on Tuesday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed regret that many bumiputera university students, susceptible to the influences of political groups and anti-Government proponents, were engrossed in political activities and performed poorly in their studies.

There was a tone of profound sadness in the Prime Minister's speech, presumably compounded by the fear that a cardinal objective of the New Economic Policy - to ensure that bumiputeras could compete with the others in the area of education - may be defeated.

Dr Mahathir's assertion that the pass rate of bumiputera students was disappointing, despite the fact that 60 per cent of places in local universities are taken up by them, raises a point to ponder.

These students, he said, expected the Government not only to provide them places at local universities, but also scholarships, grants and loans to fund their education.

But instead of repaying the Government by concentrating on their studies and passing with distinctions, some instead turned against the Government.

Influenced by those opposing the establishment, they shifted their focus and became more active in politics. Now more interested in organising or taking part in demonstrations and rallies, they further neglected their studies and in the end, performed poorly.

"They do not need university education to hold demonstrations and protests. If they want to take part in such activities, they should give up their places at the university to others who are really interested in pursuing their education," Dr Mahathir said, adding that these students were wasting public funds.

When the post of Education Minister was given to Tan Sri Musa Mohamed, a career academician, in a Cabinet reshuffle which followed the 1999 general election, Dr Mahathir explained that the move was to depoliticise the Ministry.

This is an unique departure from the Barisan Nasional's tradition. Normally, only senior members of the Cabinet are given the task of heading the Education Ministry, one of the more important portfolio.

The fact that an academician who has no experience in politics was made Education Minister goes to show the importance that the Prime Minister has placed on education. It is to ensure that education remains free from political influences which may poison the minds of the younger ones - in Dr Mahathir's own words - "the inheritors of the country's future".

But what is happening at universities these days raises the question of whether the ministry has been successful.

Opposition parties continue to penetrate campuses in mysterious ways, although political activities at universities contravene the Universities and University Colleges Act.

A number of lecturers and students openly support the opposition. So much so that the Prime Minister remarked: "I am not that popular at universities, especially those in the peninsula. I am not even welcome in some of them."

Dr Mahathir may have made the remark in jest, but the point is, political activities at universities have taken an upward trend.

The ministry must admit this and act accordingly, not simply because the students and lecturers are supporting the opposition but because their

activities are blatantly illegal.

Why the ministry and the universities are slow in taking action against these students and lecturers, is mind-boggling.

Students who receive scholarships and grants from the Government have no business taking part in political activities until they have graduated. This is because the large amount of public funds allocated to provide education to bumiputera students would be wasted if they were to spend their time and energy on activities that have nothing to do with their studies.

One solution calls for the universities to constantly monitor the performances of these students. If they do below par in their first or second year simply because of their interest in only non-academic related activities, these students should immediately be removed to save public funds.

There is no point in financing their entire course only to learn at the end of the day that they cannot make the marks for a degree, or have qualified only for a general degree - unacceptable in this case because everything has been provided for.

Given the limited places at universities, students, especially bumiputeras must acknowledge the fact that they have made it to the universities at the expense of others, some of whom are more qualified than they are.

To maintain the standard of education at local universities, the ministry must also tighten entry requirements for all students - bumiputeras and non-bumiputeras alike.

As it is, bumiputera students have the impression that they are guaranteed a place at local universities even if they only scored mediocre results in school-level examinations like the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia.

This, by itself, eliminates the culture of competitiveness and the drive to excel. When such an attitude is taken with them when they enter universities, they tend to concentrate on other activities and neglect their studies.

On the other hand, non-bumiputera students have bumiputera and non-bumiputera friends to compete with. They are often reminded, even from primary school days, that they can only find a place at the universities if they scored excellent results.

The spirit of competitiveness which is instilled upon them from young, helps the non-bumiputeras achieve excellent results when they make it to the institutions of higher learning. In other words, the disparity between the bumiputeras and the non-bumiputeras which the NEP sought to narrow, continues to exist at least in terms of performance.

Bumiputera students must discard the notion that the Government is compelled to provide them with everything.

As such a mentality does not augur well for the future of the students and the country in general, it may be time for the ministry to think again.

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