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De-politicise our campuses

AS stakeholders in the country's education system, the public has the right to be concerned over some worrying developments and trends in our institutions of higher learning.

The involvement of some university students in street protests, clandestine distribution of vile anti-Government messages, hate campaigns against national leaders, demonstrations and other illegal activities point to a degeneration of the academia's polity. It is characterised not only by the lack of original thinking among some academicians and their disciples but also by an erosion in intellectual tradition and accountability. But more disconcerting are academic mediocrity, especially among the Malays, the lack of discipline among some students and alas, the lack of discernment in evaluating ideas.

We have difficulty in defining this state of affairs as student activism. If it is, then there is something deeply contradictory about the activism of our young citizens in the country's tertiary institutions. It is an activism that appears to be suffused with hubris, as seen in their perception of self-righteousness and their denunciation of everything that bears the stamp of the Government. It is an activism that trivialises their responsibility to pursue knowledge and, worse, discounts the pursuit of academic excellence and prestige.

Nor do we find it easy to accept the show of rage as the foolish idealism of the young. If it is idealism, then it is defined in an ideologically xenophobic term - one that is premised on intolerance and, unfortunately, fuelled by petty political machinations of those with vested interest. We still have faith in the young's idealism. Free from corrupting influences and politicisation, it will motivate them to excel academically and liberate the country from knowledge and technology dependency on the West.

It is this form of idealism, uncorrupted and untainted, that must be restored and re-affirmed. But without the benefit of knowledge, any idealism is hollow. There is no question about it. Our undergraduates must concentrate on their studies, not waste their mental and physical energy and the taxpayers' money on unproductive and illegal activities. They must strive towards excellence for without knowledge, they will be ill-prepared to take over the leadership of the nation from the elders.

They are entitled to their own views on the Government. But right or wrong, their perceptions should not eclipse the larger picture - their contribution towards nation-building which is, at this stage, to equip themselves with knowledge. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out to the undergraduates recently, they may be unhappy with what they perceive to be corruption, cronyism, abuse of (public) funds and mega projects but they must be patient so that when they assume power one day, they will be able to manage the country well since they have gained the knowledge from their alma mater.

As cautioned by Dr Mahathir, knowledge alone is insufficient. They must have the right attitude. Our undergraduates must bear in mind that to see things from too far a height will obliterate ground realities and yet, to see things from a bird's eye view will only enlarge the speck of dirt to the point of obliterating the holistic picture. Civic consciousness should not be reduced to mob mentality and vigilante terrorism. A misinspired political agitation is an invitation for others to do the same - a sure

recipe for anarchy.

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