

**Asri: Politics, royalty shackling Malay intellect**  
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**By Susan Loone**

Outspoken Professor Mohd Asri Zainal Abidin has attributed the lack of intellectual development in the Malay community to the 'restrictions imposed by the authorities' on their freedom of thought and expression.

Knowledge should not be dependent on political power as control of people's thoughts can "kill" intellectual discourse, he said.

At a forum titled 'Challenges for Penang to become the Intellectual Hub of the Region', Mohd Asri said if the authorities continue to "control and direct" intellectual content, the rakyat would never be able to obtain the right facts.

NONE In Penang, however, the Malays have an advantage to improve their intellectual development as the state is not governed by strict laws or a palace, he said.

"The Malays are influenced by feudal values of the past, it still exists a lot today, in the likes of Perkasa president Ibrahim Ali," Mohd Asri said (photo), drawing laughter from the 100-odd crowd at the forum held in Seberang Perai recently.

Apple polishing hinders mental growth

"These values include loyalty to the King. I am not saying monarchy is wrong. But the attitude of ampu (brown nosing/apple polishing) towards political leaders and royalty contribute to this restriction (on intellectual development)," he added.

The event was organised by the Penang Institute (formerly Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute), and officially opened by Deputy Chief Minister I Mansor Othman.

Chaired by Universiti Sains Malaysia professor Amiruddin Fawzi, the forum panelists included Universiti Pertahanan Malaysia expert in history and culture, Ariffin Omar and Abim (Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement) president Amidi Abdul Manan.

Penang Institute senior executive Steven Sim said the event was a start to many more discourses on history, culture, literature and socio-economic policies that can benefit all communities, to be organised more frequently in Seberang Perai.

This was to spread out the concentration of activities and programmes which mainly take place on the island, and is one of the state government-linked think-tank's attempts, to engage with the Malay community, which has a larger presence in Seberang Perai.

Meanwhile, Mohd Asri said a civil society that is free from dependence on the government must be encouraged because in some ways, this dependency happens because the community cannot think out of the "royalty framework".

Kipas angin at work charge

He reiterated that he was not judging whether monarchy as good or bad but the institution has been used to impose restrictions, for example, on certain events or even to ban books.

"Most of the time, the sultan many not know what is happening but there are kipas angin (instigators) who would encourage such things," he quipped.

Mohd Asri also related his experience or lack of it with the customs of the palace when he was Perlis mufti - as he is a Penangite who is not familiar court protocol - questioning whether this meant he lacks 'Malay values'.

He said although in Penang, the social and intellectual environment was freer, there was still royal influence in its state administration, for example in the recent controversy on the election of mosque committee (qariyah masjid).

To lessen the Malay community's dependence on the government, Mohd Asri proposed that the state work together with NGOs to strengthen the civil society movement.

He added that within the folds of Pakatan Rakyat, there are people who still cling to the idea that the rakyat needs to depend on the government for political power.

"For example, during elections there are campaigns that if the rakyat want good roads, they should vote for this or that YB (assemblyperson)," he said.

"But if a civil society is strong, its members would question instead why weren't the roads built properly in the first place," he added.

He commended Pakatan for doing a good job in governing Kedah, Kelantan, Penang and Selangor - but warned against being too complacent with their performances.

"Don't compare yourself with Umno (or Barisan Nasional) and how they had governed the states in the past, why compare yourself to something worse?" he quipped.

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