

Freedom of speech an anchor of democracy
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Bersih 2.0, in full support of the freedom of expression, is disappointed to note recent concerted reactions made by the authorities and institutions against freedom of expression. These include:

* The harsh actions taken to suspend law lecturer Prof Dr Abdul Aziz Bari from Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA), where he made statements in relation to the Selangor sultan's recent decree concerning the Jais-Harapan Komuniti issue.

* The unusual defence made by Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak for UIA's action through a confusing play of words where he was quoted to say that Aziz Bari was not suspended from his duties by UIA but instead suspended pending investigation on whether he will be suspended from work.

* The insinuations made by Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein on "what are their true motives" (students' action).

Bersih 2.0 reiterates that freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic rights and freedoms. It is essential in enabling democracy to work and for the public to participate in decision-making of the nation. Citizens will not be able to exercise their rights if they are restricted and oppressed from expressing their views freely.

Freedom of expression is thus not only important for individual dignity but also to participation, accountability and democracy. Violations of freedom of expression often go hand in hand with other violations, in particular the right to freedom of association and assembly.

The actions taken by the UIA administration, PM Najib and Home Minister Hishammuddin are in total violation of the principles of freedom of expression and assembly. Academicians and students have every right to speech and association and these rights must be exercised without restraint.

This includes no reprisal actions must be taken against those who partake in exercising their right to expression and assembly. In the past, students and academicians have been arrested and terminated from work and studies. This must not happen.

Bersih 2.0 gives its full support to the students' right to expression and assembly and its call for a rally for academic freedom. We also call upon all citizens to support the students' freedom of expression as it is a step towards democratic reform.

Bersih 2.0 strongly rejects the scare tactics used by former IGP Abdul Rahim Noor where he correlates human rights to the rise of communism. He and those who support this claim fail to understand that human rights and freedoms are enshrined in the Malaysian constitution.

Citizens by speaking out, by collectively associating with one another for a common human rights cause, and by standing together in protest against violations of rights are exercising their freedoms as protected by the federal constitution.

This was the same tactic used by the government to detain six activists who were distributing Bersih 2.0 materials, where they were alleged to be spreading communist ideas and toppling the government. At the end of the day, all charges were dropped by the courts and they were all acquitted and all charges were dropped. The draconian Emergency Ordinance is now being reviewed for abolition due to its archaic nature.

This goes to show that repression and scare tactics no longer work. Citizens of Malaysia are standing up for their democratic rights and any such attempts to suppress these rights will only fan the wrath of the citizens. July 9 is an outstanding example of people standing up for what is just and democratic and the government would only do right by heeding the voices of the people.

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