

'Is academia in M'sia worse than in apartheid S Africa?'

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by Aidila Razak

Academics, frustrated over infringement of their freedom particularly since the persecution of law professor Abdul Aziz Bari, yesterday boldly criticised the state of academia in Malaysia, saying that it breeds an intelligentsia which is meek and uncritical.

Scathingly, USM lecturer Wan Manan Wan Muda said that in Malaysia today, instead of being awarded greater freedom like in Japan and Indonesia where academic rights are protected in the constitution, Malaysian academics are treated like "second class citizens".

"In Japan academics and university students are given more freedom as they are seen as more rational (waras) ... (but) here academics are second class citizens... We cannot speak, make comments, press statements or criticise our universities," he said during a forum at Universiti Malaya last night.

Worse still, he said, the situation in Malaysia, which sees political appointments in universities, is worse than that in South Africa during apartheid.

"I once met the secretary general of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, who was the vice-chancellor of a South African university during the apartheid era.

"The university defended its academic freedom and autonomy, and the policy did not affect its recruitment of staff and students.

"Do we have an apartheid government, that the university staff are willing to be dictated to by outsiders?" he asked, cuttingly.

25 years on, and back to square one

Shamefully, he said, the situation in academia in Malaysia has not improved much since 1985, which Wan Manan said was the pinnacle for the struggle of academic freedom in the country.

Then, USM lecturers Hashim Hussein Yaacob and Rohana Ariffin were sacked and demoted respectively for making a statement to the press, sparking protests within academia.

According to Wan Manan, about a third of the 140 people who signed the statement in support of Abdul Aziz were the same people who had stood up for Hashim Hussein and Rohana.

“For the last 25 years and 20 universities later, we haven’t moved a bit... Where are the new people in the 20 public universities, 40,000-plus academic staff and yet we cannot (get support) . I am becoming pessimistic about this academic movement, maybe the future lies with the students,” he said.

NONE Fellow panellist University of Nottingham associate professor Zaharom Nain (right) said that this situation is caused by the “socialisation” of new academics, most of whom have been “screened” from the onset.

“The new ones are not there because they have been socialised even at selection level to be the ones who will conform, so ideologically, the screening system is in the right place at the entry level. This is not total, some (non-conformists) do slip through, but such a system, however informal, is already in place,” he said.

Calling freedom of speech in Malaysia as a “myth”, Zaharom added that the reward system which favours those who “conform, don’t want to know and selfish” also sprouts “cendawan (mushrooms) and not cendikiawan (intellectuals)” who see the academia as just a job and not a calling.

This he said, makes him believe that academics are in fact “third class citizens” who don’t question the system as their job is to uphold the system.

“The role of the public intellectual is for someone else, they are more comfortable being propagandists,” he said, sharing his experience on a grant application committee and finding applications for research that “don’t test the legitimacy of policy but popularise policy”.

“It’s quite pathetic at the end of the day... for every Aziz Bari there are 10 brown-nosers and 10 cowards.”

‘Democratise the struggle’

Apathy within the academic circle, said panellist and UKM senior research fellow Denison Jayasooria, means that the fight for academic freedom must be taken into the mainstream, in a wider context of fundamental human rights.

NONE “Only the rakyat can save you,” he said.

Agreeing with this, fourth panellist and student leader and UIA student Mohd Zaki Sukery (right) said that the struggle must be “democratised (dirakyatkan)” and should not stay within academic circles.

This was lauded by Abdul Aziz, who had taught Mohd Zaki in his second year, who said that the struggle goes beyond his fate as an academic in Malaysia.

“We have to democratise this struggle. It’s not about me... people need to feel the importance... At the moment, we don’t have the right culture, the right people. The powers that be just simply don’t click to it, it’s as simple as that,” he said.

Gratifyingly, however, Abdul Aziz (at microphone) shared that he has received words of encouragement from ordinary people in mosques and markets, although his fellow professors from the National Professors Council chose to remain silent.

“I went to a lecture and everybody with posts was trying to avoid me, (but) in the market, the mosque, people come over and it has actually made it difficult for me to move around.

“I can appreciate the meaning and significance of privacy. It’s difficult for me to go around doing funny things. Now I have to behave in public,” he said, tongue-in-cheek.

The professor was suspended for a week by UIA for a statement made to Malaysiakini about the Selangor sultan’s decree over a religious body’s search of a Petaling Jaya church.

Police are investigating him for sedition, while a detractor sent him a bullet in the mail last week.