

Defend freedom against UM's assault, says Bersih

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NGO Bersih, known for its ability to mobilise mega protests, have urged the public to defend against what it said is Universiti Malaya's assault on students' freedom.

Bersih chairperson Maria Chin Abdullah said this in reference to UM's move to slap student leader Fahmi Zainol with nine charges for organising Monday's rally for Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim on campus.

Eight other students alleged to be involved in the event are also being called to defend themselves.

"On Oct 27, the young had proven that there will be more Fahmis.

"I believe that all Malaysians must stand together to end such attacks against the students and to unite, defend and protect our freedom," Maria (left) said in a statement.

Fahmi was summoned to attend a disciplinary hearing at the university on Nov 7 to answer the charges.

He will have to answer to the university for organising, holding and attending a rally without the vice-chancellor's permission; damaging the university's reputation; and possessing and using a megaphone without approval.

Calling the charges "absurd", Maria said it went against the tenets of freedom of assembly and expression.

"If UM had respected the students' right to have the event instead of conjuring obstacles to block them, the university's reputation would not have been tarnished," she said.

Focus on better ranking

Meanwhile, DAP's Seputeh MP Teresa Kok said the university should focus on improving its world ranking instead of prosecuting students.

"I urge the UM administration to withdraw the disciplinary charges against the student leaders and focus its efforts on how to improve the university's ranking," she said in a statement.

"In the inaugural US News Best Global Universities rankings launched a few days ago, among the top 500 institutions spread out across 49 countries, UM was ranked 423rd compared to National University of Singapore's 55th ranking.

Kok said despite the low position, UM appeared bent on inflicting further damage to its reputation by taking action against the nine students.

Kok was shocked at the extent to which UM went to block the event organised by PMUM.

She also said it would be "futile" for the prime minister to defend the university and claim it has autonomy.

"I cannot imagine the embarrassment that PM Najib Abdul Razak will face if he is asked about such shutdown and lockdown tactics at any international media event," she added.

'Encourage student activism'

On Oct 27, the UM administration resorted to cutting off electricity supply to parts of the university and practically locked down the campus to stop people – including students – from coming and going.

The rally on Oct 27 drew some 2,000 students and activists, who stormed through the university gates into the campus where Anwar gave a speech.

Meanwhile, DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang said the action reflected a desire to control and brainwash students instead of cultivating thinking and critical citizens.

"Without taking partisan sides of supporting BN or Pakatan parties, university administrations should encourage and not cripple the development of critical faculties of our undergraduates," he said in a statement.

Lim said universities should instead support a revival of student activism in national affairs, and a first step would be for UM to drop the charges against the students.