

Deputy minister: JI threat in campuses 'not serious'
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EXCLUSIVE June was no ordinary month for the Higher Education Ministry, as it found itself suddenly tasked to look out for suspected Jemaah Islamiah (JI) militants in university campuses.

Since the police's startling revelation of alleged JI attempts to recruit young impressionable university students, the ministry has been abuzz with speculation and bewilderment.

NONERemarkably, amidst curious accusations in a recent police briefing on the matter alleging that the puritanical Islamic school of thought Wahhabism is the root cause of terrorism, Deputy Higher Education Minister Saifuddin Abdullah (right) has stood up to defend students and faculty staff against what is highly anticipated to be the start of a witch-hunt.

In the first part of an exclusive interview with Malaysiakini, the former activist turned Umno supreme council member explained his bold stand against the accusations.

"Based on the information given to us in the briefing, I don't think it is that serious," Saifuddin said.

"But I take it that the inspector-general of police (IGP) knows more than I do. No reports have been given to me, but I think it is best for whatever information that the IGP has, to be shared to people on a need-to-know basis," he added.

What's wrong with Wahhabism?

Saifuddin had responded to a question by an opposition MP in Parliament last month, defending university students and staff against the Wahhabi accusations, to the extent of discrediting the person who made the claims.

The otherwise mild-mannered 49-year-old deputy minister is taking a brave stand against the contents of a high-level briefing which he believes may have gone too far.

NONEThe briefing last month saw Institut Latihan Islam Malaysia deputy director Zamihan Mat Zin (left) alleging a link between Wahhabism and several notable Islamic figures in the country.

Among the names mentioned were former Perlis mufti Mohd Asri Zainul Abidi, its current mufti Juanda Jaya, former Perlis menteri besar Shahidan Kassim and PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang.

"I needed to clarify. Because unless I did so, there might be those who want to go on a witch hunt. They will start listing down people whom they suspect are Wahhabis. Even if it is proven, or if they admit to it, what is the problem?"

"It's the main school of thought in Saudi Arabia. If there is a real problem with (Wahhabism), then we should find a new Mecca for Malaysians to perform their haj or umrah," said Saifuddin.

Fuelling Islamaphobia

He added that he had to make a stand because academic freedom was at stake.

NONE "It will eventually affect academic freedom. People will be discriminated against due to being labelled as a Wahhabi. Books may be banned from being used as reference or textbooks," he said.

Zamihan has since lodged police reports against Saifuddin, saying the latter's statements in Parliament have affected his credibility as a civil servant.

"He has the right to lodge a complaint," said Saifuddin, adding that the police have yet to contact him.

"There was already anxiety (when Zamihan gave the briefing). I know for a fact that some from Umno and BN were worried because they believed that it was not the way to fight terrorism.

"There is no doubt about fighting terrorism, but don't bring Islam into the equation. Then it's no better than Islamophobia," he said.

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