

Outlook for student activism still bleak
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They are active university students with promising futures. However, ever since the Hulu Selangor by-election they have fallen one by one under the axe of the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA).

NONE Four political science students from University Kebangsaan Malaysia were charged for allegedly campaigning at the by-election, and are engaged in a heated legal battle.

Another student leader from Selangor International Islamic University (Kuis) had his National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loan suspended for the same reason, and faces disciplinary action from his institution as well.

The cases are throwing the Higher Education Ministry into the spotlight, after its many promises to amend the repressive act that forbids students from participating in politics.

Its deputy minister Saifuddin Abdullah however wants to give his side of the story.

NONE "I think the official policy is that until and unless someone is found guilty of offence under the UUCA, he or she should not face any problem in the PTPTN," he said.

This does not explain why the PTPTN suspended Kuis student Ahmad Shukri Kamaruddin's loan, especially since no charges have yet been brought against him.

"Maybe there was a miscommunication (between the ministry and PTPTN)," was the best that Saifuddin (right) could muster.

In the third and final part of an exclusive interview with Malaysiakini, Saifuddin attempts to explain that while the higher education institutions in general are on the cusp of "relaxing" their stringent rules, cases of heavy-handed clampdowns still continue without much intervention from the ministry.

'Glitches in transition'

NONE When author and former Asian Wall Street Journal editor Barry Wain (left) came to town to give a talk on his highly controversial book 'Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times' in Universiti Malaya (UM) in late May, his ministry had ordered UM to prepared a detailed explanation of why they wanted to hold such a forum.

"I don't know why there was such uproar (by the ministry). Maybe because it became sensational. But I'm okay for it. It was (only) done in the university.

"I didn't know what happened (during the talk), but on principle, such a forum should be organised," he said.

"I think we are undergoing transition from before the amendment of the UUCA. It's just about a year before the new act is implemented.

"We are bound to see some glitches along the way, where we can be seen to be (saying) something on one hand, but on the other hand be seen to be doing something else.

"If we were to give universities some time, then we will see better things," he said.

Life, the university and everything

However, things look bleak for the student activist as Saifuddin said that local public universities still have a long way to go.

"Are we teaching our students the meaning of life, or are we only preparing them for employability?" he said, citing the extra emphasis on co-curricular activities in prestigious universities around the world, as compared to the local institutions.

NONE"Most of our lecturers go overseas for their first degrees, but why are their classes not as active? We all know that university education depends on the intensity of the interaction. But at the end, in most classes, students take notes only," he said.

Maybe it boils down to culture, Saifuddin reckoned. Or maybe it is the dreaded Act.

"Malaysians are generally quite timid, maybe because of our eastern civilisation. But when Malaysians go overseas, they are quite vocal.

"At the same time, maybe it's the university ecosystem. If we don't allow students to speak up, if we don't choose the best to lead the faculties, then it has nothing to do with culture," he said.

Whether it is culture, or the university ecosystem, it is noticeable that student activism has come a long way since the glory years of the 1960's and 1970's.

While Saifuddin insisted that the amendments to the UUCA should ignite some spark into local university students, who would otherwise be buried in books, it still remains to be seen if the act - which still bans politics - will be more than just cosmetic changes.

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