

## **We need permission to engage in politics?**

**Malaysiakini.com**

**July 31, 2010**

COMMENT My big 'kudos' to Chief Secretary to the Government Mohd Sidek Hassan for announcing the government's willingness to permit graduate education service officers of DG41 to DG48 to be involved in politics from Aug 1.

This makes up about 190,000 graduate teachers throughout the country.

Previously, only officers in the support group were allowed to contest or to hold any position in any political party, provided that they acquired prior written approval from the director-general of the Public Service Department or the secretary-general of the relevant ministry.

Like many others, I feel puzzled.

Why confine this only to teachers of grades DS41 to DS48? How about the rest? Headmasters, principals and education department officers are not granted similar 'privilege'. I couldn't help but see this as a form of discrimination.

And this privilege doesn't come without conditions. Teachers have to get written permission from the secretary-general of the Education Ministry before they can participate in politics. This actually defeats the whole idea of freeing teachers to join politics and begs the question, what happens if they decide to join parties that are not friendly to the present government?

Not thought through

Prime Minister Najib Razak said the government's decision to allow graduate teachers to enter politics is motivated by the desire to create a morally-sound political environment. He said this will eventually enhance the country's political leadership through intellectual leadership.

Sounds pretty good, don't you think?

The prime minister's rationale for this liberalisation is that graduate teachers do not have executive powers, therefore there is no danger where conflict interest is concerned. So officers with executive powers, sorry but you are unlucky this time.

The announcement has many grey areas, and is obviously not well thought-out, just like many of the government's previous announcements, such as the scrapping of the PMR and UPSR, the PPSMI issue, the list goes on.

It is undeniable that teachers have played an important role as community leaders in the local political scenario in the past, and will continue to do so, but they are but one of the subsets within the civil service.

Umno's agenda?

This announcement has received diverse public reactions, even among the teachers themselves, while the opposition suspects an Umno agenda behind the move.

Many expressed anxiety that the new policy has several far-reaching implications on the deteriorating quality of education, for example neglect of their basic teaching responsibilities, and leadership issues within the school hierarchy.

The National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) backed the move but warned that it should not be at the expense of the children's education.

Historically, teachers's involvement in political parties is not something new, and it was only banned in 1993 during Mahathir's administration. Umno in its prime was filled with teachers.

It is a known fact that many of the existing graduate teachers are already "active" in politics, although operating in low profile. This group of people has no choice but to become two-faced because their right to political expression is shackled by restrictive laws.

Unfortunately, it will be only teachers who from Aug 1 be 'legalised' to take up politics.

Everyone's right

Regardless of whether it is Umno's agenda or for other reasons, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 guarantees equal rights to all. Hence, everyone deserves the right to participate in any association they wish. Joining a political party will not jeopardise the work quality or productivity of an individual. It is about equality of opportunity.

The decision to allow graduate teachers to enter politics is a good one, provided they are given total freedom in expressing their own political preferences, but this right should also be accorded to all citizens.

If we are to create a morally-sound political environment, it is of paramount importance that all civil servants be also allowed to engage in politics and to join any party they want, without fear of being dismissed or victimised for taking a stand. The government should not deny their right to vote and affiliate with any party. If he or she fails to perform at work, then action should be taken against that person.

The situation now is that once you wear the hat of a civil servant, you have to give up your fundamental rights.

The question then arises whether civil servants are obliged to serve the government foolishly, or should they be permitted to use their judgment in the interest of the nation? In other words, should politicians, for their own interests, attempt to interfere with or influence civil servants?

In the end, this hasty decision exposes not only the cowardice of the government, but also the immaturity in understanding the concept of human rights for all.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/138844>