

Umno pressured to drop ban on student politics
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Umno faced an appeal at its annual congress today to allow students to take part in politics, and reverse a recent cabinet decision maintaining the ban.

Students are governed by a 1974 law that bars them from involvement in political parties and trade unions - a rule criticised as a violation of human rights and an impediment to freedom of expression.

Khairy Jamaluddin, leader of Umno's influential youth wing, reminded the party that young people will account for 49 percent of voters in the next general election.

"We propose that the (legislation) be amended to allow university students to be actively involved in politics," he said in a key policy speech.

"What is the point of us trumpeting that young people are important assets and future leaders if their wish to involve themselves (in) politics is denied and met with scorn?"

Khairy cited research that showed 75 percent of young voters - aged 21-35 - were planning to cast their ballots in the next national polls, which are expected to be held next year.

He warned Umno, which was hammered by the opposition in the last elections, that 62 percent of these young voters were not aligned to a party, but would vote for the candidate that best appealed to them.

New narrative needed

Khairy, the son-in-law of former premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who was ousted by current prime minister Najib Razak last year, also took aim at other sacred cows, including the policy of affirmative action for Muslim Malays.

He said the programme, which is resented by Chinese and Indians and criticised as stifling national competitiveness, had failed and it was time for Umno to adopt a new approach.

"We want to to introduce a new narrative for Malays that is not only focussed on defending rights, position and privileges. We need a bolder narrative to achieve unfulfilled success," he said.

The positive-discrimination system was launched after 1969 racial riots in an effort to narrow the wealth gap between the Chinese - who control the business sector - and Malays, who dominate government.

However, some of the policy's biggest beneficiaries have been Malay entrepreneurs who cash in on an array of perks including discounts on property purchases and specially allocated government projects.

- AFP