

**NGOs : don't use Sedition Act on Umno leader**  
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A number of civil society groups have opposed the use of the Sedition Act against Umno Bukit Bendera division chief Ahmad Ismail.

"The use of the Sedition Act legitimises the draconian act which has long been condemned by civil society and opposition parties.

"Rather than use it to further curb the freedom of expression – whoever the accused - the Umno politician and his colleagues who backed him with more racist statements should be made to pay his price politically," said the 16 groups in a joint press statement.

ahmad ismail bukit bendera umno penang racist cina tumpang 050908 04On the same note, the groups condemned Ahmad and Penang Umno for their efforts to shift the blame for the episode and its aftermath onto the journalist who reported the alleged inflammatory statements.

"In the process they aroused ethnic sentiments in the press conferences held on Sept 6 and 8. Most shockingly, Penang Opposition leader Azhar Ibrahim was quoted to have said of the journalist, "What was written may lead to a racial riot. If such a thing happens, he is the first person that should be shot."

"This is a thinly-veiled threat of violence. If the reporting had been wrong, why should Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak who was present when Ahmad gave his speech apologise for a fabricated report?

"And if there is any doubt of the contents of his original speech, the explicitly racist nature of the subsequent remarks by Ahmad and his colleagues in the two press conferences have confirmed their nasty intention," they said.

**Reason - the only remedy**

Ahmad courted controversy when he called the Chinese, among others, as immigrants. The Umno leader has since refused to apologise, saying that he was merely citing history.

ahmad ismail bukit bendera pinang umno tear up koh tsu koon photo 080908 zainol abidin hashim sequenceMeanwhile, the groups also pointed out that exclusivist and hate speech - whether targeted on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, lifestyle or other grounds - is inevitable in any society and cannot be eliminated through laws.

Unless we are in an emergency situation and confronted by individuals or groups inciting violence on racial grounds, there is no justification for legally policing and penalising speech and expression, they added.

The only remedy to hate speech, according to them, is the use of reason and to uphold the freedom of expression.

"When the society is mature, people like Ahmad – and their party if it refuses to penalise them - will be automatically punished by voters."

In view of this, the groups urged Malaysians to be rational and to confront ethnocentric politicians by engaging them with rigorous and open debates.

They said resorting to legal means to censor speeches is unwittingly playing into the hands of those in the government who seek to "manipulate the 'sensitive issue' paradigm to curb public discourse and political participation."

"It will also show that we as a society are intellectually incapable of refuting flawed rhetoric whatever the source."

The groups stated that their stand on the case of Ahmad is consistent with that they have taken towards recent similar cases impacting on freedom of speech and expression, notably the cases relating to forum disruption, book banning and website blocking.

"We reiterate the need to form a Parliamentary select committee to reform all freedom of speech and information and media-related laws including the Sedition Act. This is the only way we may mature as a society and fend off bigotry.

"We urge all Malaysians who oppose ethnic politics to endorse the 2008 Memorandum for Media Freedom at [www.benar.org](http://www.benar.org).

### **Stern action must be taken**

ngo dont use sedition act on ahmad ismailThrough measured and rational response, the groups said Malaysians can expose the political opportunism and the use of distorted history and other lies by the alleged inflammatory speaker and many others.

"Ahmad and others of the same ilk do not define our nationhood. His statement in no way affects the constitutional and socio-political reality that Chinese Malaysians – and other majority and minority communities - are equal citizens with similar rights as other citizens in this country.

"If anything, Ahmad has stirred a lively debate that has brought out to public attention the deep and irrational well of Umno's communalism. The apology by the Umno deputy president (Najib) and the affirmation of the equal rights of minority communities by the Umno president (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) are the steps in the right direction.

"However, now that Ahmad and Umno Penang have openly snubbed their top leaders, Umno must take stern disciplinary action to demonstrate its ability to censure its extremist and racially bigoted elements and regain the trust and confidence of, not only the non-Malays and non-Muslims, but of all Malaysians."