

'Racist' BTN: Bouquets and brickbats
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'We were shown a picture of Anwar Ibrahim with an American. The instructor told us that he is a traitor to the country as he had a good relationship with the Americans.'
This was among the issues raised during a nation building programme carried out by Biro Tatanegara or the National Civics Bureau, recalled fourth year economics student Fakhrul Zaki Fazial.

Fakhrul, who is studying in Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA), said the focus of the talks is on the Malay race.

"They (the instructors) also criticise leaders from the opposition and consider their criticism as being patriotic," he added.

Universiti Malaya student leader Mohd Ridzuan Mohammad, who attended the BTN programme in 2004, said there were even talks about other races being a threat to the Malays.

"It is not the right thing to do for BTN to play up racial sentiments... that will create racial rift...(as) this programme could influence some students (into accepting the propagation of racist ideologies)," he added.

Chin Shin Liang, a former Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) student who attended a BTN course in December 2008, related his experience.

"We were shown video clips of the Bersih rally and then pictures of war-torn Palestine with a caption; Is this what we want?...we were also shown an (unidentified) protester throwing stones."

'Promoting blind obedience'

Describing it as "incredibly biased", Chin said: "It does not show who the stone thrower is, probably a Mat Rempit who decided to join the fun or how the police provoked the protesters with a water canon in the first place."

He said the instructors also taught that the BN government is chosen by the people and therefore is the legitimate government while making no attempt to distinguish the political party and the government.

The instructors, he said, also suggested that all government agencies should serve BN and be careful of any requests from the opposition which is trying to topple the government.

"This is very misleading, because as a rule, government agencies should be neutral and serve the country as a whole (not just a particular party/coalition)," he added.

It is as if the course is suggesting that the BN government 'represents' the country and should be blindly obeyed without question, he noted.

Meanwhile, Fakhrul expressed doubts over BTN's choice of instructors.

"I feel that some of the instructors were not qualified because they were very emotional and

not intellectual in their presentations.

"If students disagreed with their viewpoint, they would be scolded in front of everyone," he said.

'BTN taught us mutual respect'

Brickbats aside, there are some quarters who felt that BTN courses have been unfairly targeted.

Yesterday, a group calling itself 'ex-BTN graduates' held a press conference in Kuala Lumpur to air their views.

"We feel it is our social responsibility to correct the lopsided views about BTN courses," said its leader Ahmad Shafei Ahmad Hanbali (*left*).

He denied that the modules sowed seeds of hatred towards other races. "BTN taught us how to mutually respect the rights of other races as spelt out in the constitution."

"It is not fair to say that BTN tries to create division when it is only teaching the country's official history," he said.

On the allegation that BTN is a propaganda tool of BN, Ahmad Shafei alluded that there was nothing wrong with teaching obedience to the sitting government.

"In a mature democracy, those who lost, even by one vote, must respect those who have won and the victory that the majority of the rakyat has given to the victors," he said.

Also coming to the defence of BTN was Majlis Gabungan NGO Pembela Negara (Magaran) legal adviser, Mohd Khairul Azam Abdul Aziz.

He said everything that is taught in BTN courses follows what is spelt out in the constitution.

He explained that the special position of the Malays, Bahasa Melayu and Islam is clearly mentioned in articles like 152 and 153 of the constitution.

Mohd Khairul, who claims to be a BTN graduate himself, said "these are facts, not opinions."

ISO certification

As for allegations of facts, issues and images being manipulated and misrepresented, he explained: "These images and issue are not uncommon even outside BTN, these are usual fare in blogs, publications and other sources. Every fact, image and issue shown or mentioned is credited to sources."

"Participants can think for themselves, BTN is just exercising freedom of speech. I think that the use of those images are appropriate (in order to highlight certain matters)."

Asked about the problem some graduates have with instructors, Mohd Khairul said: "Report the wrongdoings of the instructors and BTN will address the problem. Don't reject BTN totally."

In 2008, BTN was apparently awarded ISO certification by Sirim for its courses.

However, concerned parties have pointed out that Sirim's endorsement only confirms BTN's ability to deliver the training on a consistent basis, not an endorsement of the course contents.

Commenting on this, Tenaganita director Irene Fernandez asked whether the authorities who issued the certification are "conscious of the seditious and racially inflammatory nature of the curriculum".

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