

## **Malaysian scholars, be more critical, please!**

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**Susan Loone**

The Malaysian Social Science Association was ticked off yesterday by a former colleague turned politician for being fearful of expressing their views because "it hurts the government".

pkp national congress 301108 syed husin aliPKR deputy president Syed Husin Ali (right), who is also former MSSA president from 1980-1990, felt 'turned-off' by scholars who lacked engagement with communities and refrained from critical analysis of the country's current state of affairs for fear of upsetting the authorities.

"That is a very wrong attitude, it reflects psychological fear. There is so much more fear and control now; the police, media, courts, students, workers and academics as well," he chided, during the closing of the 7th Malaysian Studies Conference (MSC) held at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, from March 16-18.

Syed Husin, who is also a three-year term senator at the Dewan Negara, was referring to a resource person at the conference whom he claimed dared not venture beyond the topic he was presenting for fear of hurting the government.

In Malaysia, academic freedom is constrained under the 1971 Universities and Universities Colleges Act, and a compulsory agreement signed between students, lecturers and universities/college administration, dubbed the 'AkuJanji' (I pledge).

These restrictions have seen several students and lecturers face disciplinary action for participating in alleged political activities.

'Vice-chancellors government nominees'

Meanwhile, Syed Husin continued to lash out at the universities by saying that vice-chancellors were nominees of the government.

He called for this psychological fear to be eliminated so that there could be wider space and more freedom for academics to express their views about society.

"Unless that happens, there will be no meaningful future for social sciences," he warned.

"Since the past 50 years, the government's agenda of a united nation has failed; the undercurrents are really serious, (it) must be studied seriously, to get to the truth, to get committed and to get engaged," he suggested.

"If we want to see social sciences grow, we must fight for freedom and for justice, and to be engaged with the community," he added.

Concerns raised

Meanwhile, Professor Dr. Jomo Kwame Sundaks jomo public lecture 051208 ks jomoram, assistant secretary to the United Nation (General for Economy Development), and founder of the MSC conference way back in 1974, also raised his concerns about the lack of cohesiveness between the various disciplines.

Jomo (left), who was present at the university to present a keynote address entitled 'The Global Economic Crisis: Implications for Malaysia' was concerned that the disciplines were fragmented as scholars often passively borrow ideas from the west without developing their own.

He advised the participants of the event not to compartmentalise their knowledge like the West but to strive for an interdisciplinary approach between knowledge and methodology.

"Realism is very important; if we do not pursue this project (Malaysian studies), we will become victims of our own fragmentation," warned Jomo, who is currently based in New York.

Francis Loh Kok Wah, professor of politics, from USM called for the Association to draw historians into its future work, citing a decline in multidisciplinary approach in research work especially among younger social scientists.

"(The MSSA must) work with the Malaysian History Association which has not convened a major conference in seven to eight years," he lamented, adding that ominously, the teaching of history has seen a decline over the years.

Loh, who is the secretary of Penang-based social reform group Aliran, proposed that scholars should problematise familiar issues by extending studies of one's own ethnic-religious community to studies of "others" in Malaysia, thus bridging the racial-religious divide between communities.

"Compare developments in Malaysia to the situation elsewhere like what the Japanese, Koreans, Chinese and Singaporeans are now doing," he added.

About 250 participants attended the three-day conference, which saw research papers on various topics presented and discussed by well-known personalities from the academe, government and non-governmental organisations.

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