

After quit call, SMM rallies to Saifuddin's side
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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 23 — Solidariti Mahasiswa Malaysia (SMM) today came to the defence of Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, after he was asked to quit by a pro-government student group two days ago.

On Wednesday, a group called Aspirasi Undergraduate Leaders' Alumni Society (Aspirasi) gathered outside the Higher Education Ministry building in Putrajaya to show support to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and demand Saifuddin resign as deputy minister and as an Umno supreme council member.

The undergraduates were reacting to Saifuddin's actions in the wake of a street protest last Saturday outside the Umno headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, during which a supporter of two student movements, SMM and the Movement for Academic Freedom (Bebas), had lowered from a flagpole a banner bearing Najib's likeness before raising it again.

"We welcome Pro Aspirasi's demonstration, which shows they have accepted protest as an effective channel to voice opinions in a democratic system," SMM chairman Ahmad Syukri Abdul Razak told reporters at a press conference here.

"However, Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah should not resign as long as the issue of UUCA (University and University Colleges Act) is not finished," he added.

Syukri said the outspoken Cabinet minister "has been made victim by certain parties in the government".

"We fully support Saifuddin's leadership in (the) Higher Education (Ministry). This is the voice of undergraduates, there is no political motive," he said.

"We are ready to unite. Only by lowering the PM's banner, this can be reality. This is a hint to the PM," he added.

Syukri said that, so far, only Saifuddin has responded to the students' demands.

"The PM, minister of higher education, first deputy higher education minister have not responded," he said.

Earlier this week, SMM had given Najib until "before the elections" to repeal the UUCA, which the undergraduates say denies them their academic freedom.

Saifuddin previously said the government remains committed to amending the UUCA to provide for greater academic freedom despite the incident.

He said he believed in "undergraduate idealism" and supported their right to freedom of expression in a democracy, adding that "the banner-lowering incident is not a part of the democracy that is meant".

Saifuddin, who chaired a roundtable on the proposal for the law, said talks were going well

and would be continued to seek wider and more open views.

"It strengthens the commitment to uphold true democracy that is desired by amending (UUCA)," he said in a statement.

He said the committee to amend the Act would begin work shortly and expects the government would be ready to present the revised law in Parliament next year.

Yesterday, Saifuddin pledged to defend the rights of all students to assemble and voice their views, even those who had demanded he take responsibility over last Saturday's "banner incident."

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