

At roundtable talk, growing pressure for UUCA repeal

The Malaysian Insider

December 17, 2011

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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 17 — A roundtable discussion today on the proposed amendment to the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) quickly turned into a debate on the actual effectiveness of the government's proposal, with many declaring that amending the Act was insufficient.

Many participants, including student leaders from various universities, academics and other stakeholders, want the government repeal the UUCA altogether, and replace it with a new law.

Ramon felt the government should scrap the UUCA and come out with a new Act. A number of them argued that amending section 15 of Act, which will allow students aged above 21 to become members of political parties, did not suffice, and that other sections needed to be looked at as well.

"From today's discussion, it seems that there is no support for piecemeal, evolutionary changes, instead there seems to be a need for a comprehensive change, a new Act.

"The interesting fact out of today's discussion is that it is not just about students, issues on university autonomy have also been raised," said UiTM law expert Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi.

The law lecturer, who sits on the special committee overseeing the UUCA amendment, suggested a parliamentary select committee (PSC) be formed on the matter.

"This will mean a lot of delays as PSCs take years at times," he said.

He said that there was no "empirical proof" that students' involvement in politics would bring down their academic performance.

Shad said that there were "Napoleons" within university administrations who "stretched their powers" and made life very difficult for students.

"University life has become rather oppressive (due to) some officers overzealously enforcing (laws). We have to change the mentality of these officers," he added, referring to the Department of Student Affairs (HEP).

Proham member Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam said the government should "ideally scrap it (UUCA) and come out with a new Act".

"Tinkering (with the current Act) won't get us far. Why can't ordinary laws be applied to students?" he said, adding that if there was no proper reform the changes made will only be seen as "half-hearted."

Muhammad Sha'ani said students should be accorded freedom of expression.

A representative from Universiti Malaya's (UM) student council, Mohd Iqbal Abdul Halim, argued that the UUCA was discriminatory against youths who went to university as those who were not studying could join political parties.

"This is a cycle of stupidity," he said.

Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) chief executive Wan Saiful Wan Jan charged that the government had no right to even "justify" limiting the freedom of university students.

Relating his experience as a student overseas, he accused the government of "selective persecution", citing how student clubs like overseas Kelab Umno were allowed to be run by students while other politically-affiliated groups were clamped down.

Muhd Faiz Affendi Yunus Mohd Fathil, a representative from Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (Unitar), stressed that the only long-term solution was through a repeal of the UUCA.

"University is the only place in the world where students can make mistakes. The Act is draconian. Please repeal it, not amend it."

The Malaysian Human Rights Commission also offered its feedback, stating that students should be accorded freedom of expression and that taking part in politics has been "criminalised" by the authorities.

"The police are now experts in defining offences when their task should be taking care of (the country's) security," said Suhakam commissioner Muhammad Sha'ani Abdullah.

Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, who organised the talk, acknowledged the views of the participants but said he could not give a guarantee that the government would actually move to repeal the UUCA entirely.

He did however say that the government was "open to all possibilities" when asked whether more sections of the UUCA would be amended.

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