

Don't blame campus uprisings on UUCA changes, Saifuddin tells Umno hardliners
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 26 — Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah has hit back at critics within Umno who blame controversial acts by university students and lecturers on the deputy higher education minister's support for more academic freedom.

The Umno supreme council member told The Malaysian Insider that none of these controversies comes under the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA), which is set to be amended in the March parliamentary sitting to allow students to be politically active.

Saifuddin said the government remains committed to amending the UUCA despite the controversies. — File pic

"They keep saying 'even without amending the UUCA, you already see all this unruly behaviour.' But none of these things falls under the UUCA. It is irrelevant to the issue of academic freedom," said the Temerloh MP, who has been Putrajaya's pointman for its proposed amendment.

He said that constitutional expert Abdul Aziz Bari's suspension from the International Islamic University in October, which led to protests from hundreds of students, concerned alleged seditious remarks by the professor with regards to the Selangor Sultan.

"Adam Adli bringing down the banner is trespass and the demonstration in support of him was an illegal gathering. None of that is covered under the UUCA," he said.

Earlier this month, undergraduate Adam Adli Abdul Halim was suspended for three semesters by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) for allegedly bringing the institution into disrepute.

The student activist was earlier probed for his role in a controversy that was sparked by his lowering of a banner bearing the likeness of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak here last month.

On December 17, about 100 student activists had marched to the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) to hand over a six-point memorandum on academic freedom to Saifuddin.

Adam, 22, had lowered and then raised a banner of Umno president Najib outside the party's headquarters, immediately drawing criticism from the public and some government officials.

Hardliners within Umno had blamed Saifuddin for the incident, saying it would not have happened if he did not welcome the protestors.

But 37,000 people have signed up to a Facebook campaign called "We Are All Adam Adli" created in support of the chairman of student group Legasi Progresif Mahasiswa.

Fellow campaigners also organised a sit-in at UPSI's campus in Tanjung Malim on New Year's Eve, which saw several students injured when police moved to disperse the

assembly.

During the ensuing exchange, the president of undergraduate movement Bebas, Muhammad Safwan Anang, claimed he was punched and kneed by policemen, resulting in him being hospitalised.

The police, however, have denied assaulting the students, and insisted there was "no scuffle" when arrests were made.

Despite these controversies, Saifuddin has insisted that the government remains committed to amending the UUCA.

Najib announced in November the government would soon amend section 15 of the UUCA to allow students aged above 18 to become members of political parties.

His announcement followed a Court of Appeal ruling that Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) had breached Article 10 of the Federal Constitution when it disciplined four students involved in a political campaign last year under section 15(5)(5)(a).

Despite plans to amend the Act, the prime minister stressed his administration would still appeal the court ruling and that political activities on campuses remain strictly prohibited.

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