

Minister to monitor public varsities once UUCA amendment made law
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 27 — Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin will personally co-ordinate the implementation of new laws on student participation in politics once they are passed next month to ensure they are not “overzealously” interpreted.

Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah (picture) said monitoring was necessary as although the law would permit students to become active political party members, politics would still be banned from university campuses.

“Fundamental liberties must be generously interpreted while provisions that limit guaranteed rights should be read restrictively,” he said in a recent interview with The Malaysian Insider, quoting a court judgment by Tan Sri Gopal Sri Ram.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak said last year the government would lift the ban on student participation in politics, as part of his administration’s political reforms, and that amendments would be tabled to amend the controversial section 15 of the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA), to allow students above the age of 18 to be active members of political parties.

The prime minister had however stressed that under the law, politics would still be banned from university campuses.

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) lawmakers, who have long been advocates of student politics, have criticised the amendment as insufficient, saying it reflected the Najib administration’s insincerity in its pledge to increase civil liberties.

Saifuddin noted, however, that although the federal opposition wanted the entire UUCA repealed, there should not be much of a problem getting both sides of the political divide to agree on an amendment “for the time being”.

“The spirit of the amendment is for universities to observe a more progressive practice of democracy. The minister will advise university administrations once the amendments are passed,” he said.

Saifuddin also said some public universities would need to amend their constitutions and policies in line with the amendment to section 15.

Section 15(5)(a) of the UUCA states: “No student of the University and no organisation, body or group of students of the University which is established by, under or in accordance with the Constitution, shall express or do anything which may reasonably be construed as expressing support for or sympathy with or opposition to any political party, whether in or outside Malaysia.”

“I know a hostel in a public university where its ‘Aku Janji’ (pledge) says ‘I will not show support to any political party except the ruling party.’

"We cannot have that, so some things will need to change," he said.

The Temerloh MP said the current amendment would only involve section 15 of the UUCA, adding that 60 per cent of the attendees at the public consultation sessions organised by his ministry wanted an amendment instead of a repeal.

"Many of them wanted an amendment, while the minority, who were the vocal ones, wanted a repeal. It's the case of the silent majority. But for now, what we are looking at is the amendment," he said. But he did not dismiss the fact that other improvements would come in the future.

"It is nothing official, but looking at the discussions from the consultation sessions, there have been calls to look into the current power of authority vested in the vice-chancellor of a university as well as provisions that do not allow students to seek legal counsel when they are facing disciplinary action.

"But these will have to come later."

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