

Another blow to academic freedom, say Pakatan MPs on UM professor's removal
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The removal of renowned political scientist Professor Datuk Dr Mohamad Redzuan Othman from Universiti Malaya's Centre for Democracy and Elections (UMcedel) is another blow to academic freedom and impartiality in public universities, opposition lawmakers said today.

They said the former UMcedel director was impartial in his research and had criticised both Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat, but added that his impartiality was apparently not enough for BN, which was said to be unhappy with Redzuan for purportedly being opposition-friendly.

"The action by the Minister of Education is a disgrace and proves that he is unfit to be leading the main policy body to train and equip our young leaders with critical thinking and analytical minds," DAP publicity chief Tony Pua told The Malaysian Insider.

"What is the point of conducting empirical studies to obtain reliable statistics for in-depth analysis, if one gets the sack when the conclusions are not favourable to BN?" he asked.

Pua said it was no surprise that local academics find it difficult to get their research published in international journals for peer recognition, noting that this culminated in poor international rankings.

"If the Ministry of Education cannot grant academic freedom and political impartiality to our local professors, in this case the study of political science, UM might as well shut down the entire department," said Pua.

Pua said the ministry's directive to Redzuan was "hardly surprising", as it was not the first time it interfered in a university's academic freedom.

The Petaling Jaya Utara MP noted that Professor P. Ramasamy and Dr Aziz Bari were both forcibly removed from University Kebangsaan Malaysia and International Islamic University Malaysia, respectively.

DAP's Seremban MP Anthony Loke told The Malaysian Insider that the move showed there was no room for academic freedom in Malaysia.

"An independent academic cannot survive in our public universities. It has been proven again that any independent minded academic will face this kind of pressure, especially when their research is not in favour of the ruling party."

He said Redzuan's research on elections was always accurate, and anyone unhappy with the results could simply disagree with his findings, rather than prevent him from conducting future studies with UMcedel.

"Redzuan has done tremendous work in the past few years in this field of election research... even though anyone can argue or disagree with his findings, I think he should be given the freedom to conduct his research."

Loke, who is also DAP national organising secretary, urged the government to confirm whether it had interfered in the public university.

"If it is, I call upon Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin to

immediately retract that order and reinstate Redzuan as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and chief of UMcedel.”

DAP’s Serdang MP Dr Ong Kian Ming, a former lecturer himself, urged education ministers Muhyiddin and Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh to give their full commitment towards upholding academic freedom in higher learning institutions.

“[They must] make it clear to all civil servants and vice-chancellors that this academic freedom is a crucial part of improving our academic standards and rankings.

“Academics should not be punished for pursuing legitimate academic research including in the field of politics and political science even if the results do not seem favourable to the ruling party.”

Ong added that rather than be punished, Redzuan should be applauded for his efforts to carry out surveys on elections, a field in its infancy in Malaysia.

He pointed out that academic freedom, especially in the social sciences, was an integral part of pushing the research agenda in any university.

“It should be noted that UMcedel was accurate in predicting a win in the popular vote for Pakatan Rakyat in GE13 but that the BN would win the majority of seats,” he noted.

Ong said Redzuan had also chaired a UMcedel forum post-GE13, and invited himself, Umno’s Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah and PKR’s Bukit Katil MP Shamsul Iskandar.

"This kind of engagement with BN as well as PR politicians should be part and parcel of the research agenda of any institute or centre that examines and does research on elections in Malaysia," said Ong.

Following The Malaysian Insider breaking the news of Redzuan's removal this morning, Saifuddin, the former deputy higher education minister, announced that he was quitting as senior research fellow at UM's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, in solidarity with Redzuan.

In a Facebook post today, he confirmed that "certain quarters" from the Education Ministry had pressured Redzuan to quit as UMcedel director.

"But he did not make a big fuss of it. Today, his tenure as dean was also discontinued, even though he was nominated by the lecturers of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences," wrote Saifuddin.

The Malaysian Insider understands that Redzuan's work in UMcedel has sealed his fate at the university.

It was learnt that over the last few years, UMcedel had irked Putrajaya with its various survey findings showing the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) in a bad light.

One survey which was said to have rattled the BN was conducted during the run-up to the 2013 general election, where its findings showed that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak trailed behind opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The UMcedel poll showed that more than 60% of voters surveyed favoured Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) manifesto, compared to just 50% for BN's election pledges.

It also showed that 43% of respondents believed that Anwar was qualified to be prime minister, pipping Najib by four percentage points.

Najib had rubbished the findings and many BN supporters questioned the methodology used.

UMcedel in its reply noted that Najib had been pleased with earlier surveys after he had assumed office which painted a positive picture of him and the BN.

However, despite the projections, BN won the 13th general election but with a reduced majority, capturing 133 parliamentary seats. Pakatan, meanwhile, clinched 89 out of the 222 parliamentary seats.

Within the academic circles, it is common knowledge that Redzuan, a history professor, had often faced pressure from the Education Ministry over the centre's findings.

The Malaysian Insider learnt that Putrajaya was also unhappy with Redzuan for purportedly being opposition-friendly, although he had on many occasions explained it by saying, "where would I be without politicians".

Apart from surveys on the BN and Najib's popularity, UMcedel had also conducted a study on Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and the Umno elections.

Pressure against Redzuan included interference in his university programmes that involved PR leaders, which the academic had repeatedly resisted.

According to UM's website, Redzuan was to serve as director from February 26, 2012 to December 31, 2014. It is understood that a ceremony will be held today to hand over his post to his deputy, Profesor Dr Md Sidin Ishak. – June 30, 2014.

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