

Don: Arrests over calls for PM's resignation show laws misinterpreted

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Dr Azmi Sharom Legal Scholar from University Malaya speaks at a public forum in Kuala Lumpur. — Picture by Siow Feng Saw

PETALING JAYA, Sept 20 — The arrests of individuals for alleged actions against parliamentary democracy simply for demanding the prime minister's resignation demonstrates how laws are misinterpreted, Universiti Malaya associate professor Dr Azmi Sharom said today.

Speaking at a forum on the freedom of expression, Azmi cited the growing use of Section 124B of the Penal Code that criminalises activities detrimental to parliamentary democracy as an example of how the police were enforcing laws in ways not intended.

He also said the passage of the increasingly controversial law illustrated lawmakers' lack of appreciation for the civil liberties of Malaysians.

"When you think about [actions against parliamentary democracy] as an ordinary person, what does it mean? You're thinking about violence, you're thinking about using weapons and shooting a minister or something."

"How come when someone says they want the prime minister to resign, that is deemed undermining parliamentary democracy, when it is not?" he said.

Former Umno leader and critic of 1 Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) Datuk Seri Khairuddin Abu Hassan was the latest person to be arrested for actions detrimental to parliamentary democracy, and is currently remanded for six days.

Others detained under the law include 17 students arrested last month after a sit-in outside Parliament to pressure Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak to resign, over 20 protesters at the #TangkapNajib rally in early August, and MPs Tony Pua and Nurul Izzah Anwar for alleged attempts to purchase stolen data related to 1MDB.

"We mustn't get caught up in the idea that we can make a 'good' law. Because right now, what saddens me is that the very foundations of our rights as human beings is not appreciated or understood by those who make the law and those who enforce the law," Azmi added.

He said that one of the problems with laws in the country was that people had to justify their freedoms, when instead it should be lawmakers justifying the restriction on freedoms.

"This is based on the assumption that freedom is a good thing and should be respected. Therefore every restriction of freedom has to be justified," he said.

"But there is not necessarily an appreciation for freedom by the lawmakers themselves."

Sitting on the panel with him today, was also Bersih 2.0 chair Maria Chin Abdullah and Bukit Gelugor MP Ramkarpal Singh.

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