

Politics in Academia

The recent controversy surrounding the textbook for the newly introduced ethnic relations course in universities and the manner in which the whole episode was handled leaves much to be desired. How are we to improve the quality of our tertiary education if this were to go on? ■ By Khaldun Malek

THE RECENT controversy over the issue of the newly introduced textbook on ethnic relations published by Universiti Putra Malaysia is in danger of setting an ugly precedent. The way in which the issue has been inflated in public should give us much cause for concern.

One minister seems to have taken it upon himself to admonish the publication as being 'seditious', whilst the Opposition (along with a number of Barisan Nasional (BN)'s own parliamentarians) have taken it upon themselves to vilify the text, instead of encouraging a more meaningful discussion on what they consider to be a misappropriation of history.

The government, on the other hand, has clamped down on the issue, by withdrawing the book. The media, to be sure, has also played their part in sensationalising the issue. Surely, instead of disproportionately dramatising the issues involved, wouldn't it have been ideal if the media had taken the lead in providing a medium where such concerns could be aired in a civilised and rational manner? Or is that hoping for too much? Is the media now more concerned about amateurish spin-doctoring more than anything else?

Did the book warrant such

reactions? Where do we draw the line at offending social sensitivities? Is it merely done as a knee-jerk reaction? Do we respond to criticisms by politicians looking for cheap publicity (I mean come on, Lim Kit Siang may be an honourable and longstanding parliamentarian, but is he necessarily in a position to make an unbiased and objective comment on the issue – it was his party that was mentioned in the book)?

So do we now ban the study of history, politics and other social science subjects on the same grounds – since almost without exception, the majority of scholarly texts do raise the same issues over and over again? If the issue is about the truth of the matter, then surely the appropriate place to discuss it fruitfully would be the university, or do we now wish for politicians to tell academics exactly the kinds of topics (and truths) they can or can't teach? In the recent debacle surrounding the state of our public universities, surely this cannot be helpful towards the goal of improving our tertiary institutions? And wasn't it the Opposition who felt so strongly about the need for our universities to improve and become the beacons for the search for truth and knowledge that is the *raison d'être* of these institutions?

Now, any student of history will tell you that there are no uncontested facts in history. History, to an extent, is always

open to interpretation. However, this is not to say that there are no such things as historical 'facts'. What it implies is that as historians unearth new evidence which corresponds to an event or series of events, they should adopt their position accordingly.

Any document written in the human and social sciences will always be dependent on the nature of the facts available in hand and the methods employed in investigating, evaluating and arranging these facts. Of course, when history is at stake, there's always a chance that somebody out there might (for good reason or otherwise) consider the narrative erroneous. But, apparently, that isn't the issue here, for as the said minister seems to suggest, let the truth be damned, especially when that truth can, according to him, create dissension within the ever-so-fragile ranks of Malaysian society.

Ironically, the only voice of sanity so far has been that of Higher Education Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, who has been courageous (at the expense of being vilified publicly for it) enough to try and put the issue in perspective. His suggestion that some of the contents were factually based (to the best of his knowledge) and, therefore, should be allowed for publication runs in parallel to the transparent and ethically driven

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agenda espoused by the Prime Minister and his administration. In light of the efforts put in by the administration to make documents pertaining to the various issues raised by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad public, it seems apt and consistent that the book be given equal treatment. So therefore, it seems inappropriate that a said member of our esteemed Cabinet has openly asserted that regardless of the truth of the matter, such information ought not to be discussed openly.

Article 11 was given the opportunity to hold their meeting in Johor Baru (JB) despite the misgivings of a number of different organisations such as Umno Youth, Pas and Jemaah Islamiah about what they considered to be religiously sensitive issues. It was suggested that these issues could be construed as offensive to certain segments of the Muslim community in the country. Yet, true to form, the scheduled meeting was allowed to continue despite the concerns of some of these groups. It does appear somewhat strange that whereas the concerns of the Opposition (whose claims as to the content of the book are as yet unproven) and a small section of BN MPs were heeded, the concerns and potential ramifications of the concerned groups over the JB meeting


were left unrecognised. The government is surely correct in allowing for the meeting to go on (for issues of public interest ought to be given an open hearing), it should have also been consistent that the UPM publication, as such, be given equal treatment. After all, both religion and race are equally difficult and important issues for the public.

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Now, whether the contents of the book are correct or otherwise is one issue; but perhaps more importantly, it would seem churlish of the administration to so readily pull it out of circulation without allowing the truth of the matter to reveal itself. If the greater concern was as so clearly put by the Prime Minister – in order to avoid offending the sensitivities of the people – then surely the meetings held so far in Penang and now JB would involve the same concerns? Or is it because we assume our university students are not mature and intelligent enough to deal with these issues rationally? Or, perhaps, our academics cannot be trusted to guide their students on these issues fairly and analytically?

There is no suggestion that there is a

'right' or 'wrong' answer in this debate; but merely the question of whether Malaysians are mature enough to deal with the realities of their histories. I say this because there are different approaches to historical studies; social history, political history, economic history etc and different methods within each; Marxist, Liberal and so on. Surely, the concerns brought up by Kit Siang, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz and others are not meant to be dealt with in Parliament but, perhaps, are a subject more suitable for academic reflection. It would be tragic if these concerns were to be discussed by politicians rather than among academics, where such issues would be given their proper bearing.

Or is the purpose of academia merely to validate what politicians think? It's easy to blame political chicanery for the problems of our public institutions but the responsibilities must be shouldered by the universities themselves as well. Perhaps, it's time that academics started becoming more responsible towards their duties as purveyors of the pursuit of knowledge and truth. 

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