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Rebels with a cause

Former student leaders and academics, old and young, share their views on the University and University Colleges Act 1971 and its proposed amendments.

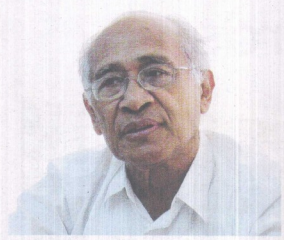
By RICHARD LIM
educate@thestar.com.my

THE University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), has always been a touchy issue to local university students and academics as it subjects them to certain restrictions.

The UUCA (more commonly referred to as AUKU – Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti) is a focal campaigning point for pro-Mahasiswa candidates during student elections. In fact, splinter groups like Suara Mahasiswa Malaysia and Gerakan Mahasiswa Mansuhkan Auku have garnered a sizeable following for opposing it. Of 1971 vintage, the UUCA has undergone three facelifts, in 1975, 1983 and 1996. The 1975 amendments were the most stringent.

Hishammuddin remembers the days when student unions ran charities, offered scholarships and even provided bus services on campus.

Dr Azmi likens the UUCA to throwing the baby out with the bathwater.


Dr Syed Husin believes that university students should be involved in student movements, to help shape the nation.

Calm before the storm

Back in the 1960s and 70s, student movements yielded considerable power, as evident in the May 1968 student protests in Paris, which toppled the de Gaulle government.

From its origins in the West, the global phenomenon soon moved eastwards.

Although not as forceful as their counterparts in neighbouring Thailand and the Philippines, Malaysian students held non-partisan rallies to educate the public on their political rights in 1969. It being an election year, the students wanted people to know they could have a say through the ballot. According to Prof James Chin from Monash University Malaysia, the original UUCA was enacted to curb student political groups in an era when student activism was widespread.

"The only two countries in the region that were relatively unaffected by student unrest were Malaysia and Singapore. There was genuine concern when student protests led to the military junta in Thailand being ejected in 1973," he says.

However, the original law was not stringent.

"The original act focused more on providing order with regards to the creation and structure of the university," recalls Dr Azmi Sharom, Universiti Malaya's (UM) Academic Staff Association vice-president.

Former UM leftist student leader Hishammuddin Rais adds that it was business as usual for student unions then.

"We freely held our Wednesday night debates, as well as forums on local and international issues such as America's role in the world, the Yom Kippur War and apartheid," says the activist.

"The UM student union was also financially independent as it collected fees. With the money, the union ran its own cafes and charities, and even provided bus services on campus," Hishammuddin adds.

The grip tightens

However, events in 1974 paved the way for the 1975 amendments, which made the UUCA a monolithic structure in local academia.

Political and social consciousness was high in local universities then and the demolition of the homes of Tasik Utara squatters in Johor moved Singaporean and Malaysian students (primarily from UM) to congregate at Bukit Bendahara, where they protested for three days.

As a result, the UM student union was banned, but student involvement continued during the Baling Peasant Protest in 1974.

"The falling price of rubber then affected the Baling peasants," says Parti Keadilan Rakyat vice-president and former UM staff union secretary, Dr Syed Husin Ali.

"Rumours persisted that they did not have enough food. While the farmers were suffering, parliament decided to raise the allowance of parliamentarians significantly and this enraged the students," Dr Syed Husin adds.

"UM students organised small gatherings that grew in size and spread to other university and colleges, leading to demonstrations."

The UUCA was subsequently amended in 1975 and Section 15 was introduced. It prohibits a student or students' organisation, body or group from associating with societies (i.e. political parties and trade unions) – except as provided under the Constitution, or with approval from the vice-chancellor (VC).

Strict punishment, including suspension or expulsion from the university, will be meted out against dissenting students.

Among the dissenters back in the 1970s was Hassan Karim, who was once the secretary-general of UM's Socialist Club and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia's (now Universiti Putra Malaysia) student union vice-president.

"I organised a boycott of lectures in Universiti Pertanian to protest the UUCA review in Parliament as it is designed to control not only students, but academia and academic staff as well," says Hassan, now president of Parti Rakyat Malaysia.

"I was booted from UPM and denied entry to other local universities and was forced to do an external degree."

Dr Syed Husin was detained under the Internal Security Act in 1974 but Hishammuddin managed to slip out of the country, thus escaping arrest. He remained in exile for almost 20 years.

Prof Chin states that the proposed amendments to the UCCA do not live up to the expectations of the academic community as there are no fundamental changes.

Gerakan Mahasiswa Mansuhkan Auku (GMMA) coordinator Ridzuan Mohammad (with tag) explaining a memorandum against the UUCA to Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Idris Haron at Parliament building, in August. – Bernama

A step backwards

Dr Azmi believes that the ruling regime clamped down hard after student movements displayed the potential to be a threat to the authorities.

"Students were raising society's consciousness and socialism was an underlying theme of the Baling protests," he muses.

Although authorities managed to quell student activism, which greatly diminished in the '80s and '90s, some argue that it was a Pyrrhic victory as the UUCA stifled the cognitive development of varsity students, resulting in a dearth of talent for the nation.

"The UUCA contradicts the idea of a university where theories and opinions are refined through constant dialogues and debates," says Hishammuddin. "By curtailing individual freedom and creativity, you hamper true education and deter the young from thinking critically."

Hassan, who agrees with Hishammuddin, remembers his university days as a time of continuous interaction between students and lecturers.

"There was a conducive learning environment where ideas could be freely discussed," he says. "We could organise forums and debates easily without the need to obtain permission from the student affairs department (or HEP – *hal ehwal pelajar*)."

Going a step further, Dr Syed Hamid states that the UUCA is unfair.

"It only applies to those in local universities. Malaysian students overseas can be politically involved through Kelab Umno and the MCA," he points out. "Why can't local students engage in politics when they reach the legal age? Why deny them the same personal liberties?"

Dr Azmi likens the UUCA to throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and adds that it is not fair to link declining education standards to the Act, as some people claim. "The fact is, universities are badly run and it isn't just the UUCA. Other laws and policies also prohibit freedom amongst university staff," he says.

In 2006, armed with banners and posters, some 150 students from public universities gathered outside the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur to demand free and fair campus elections.

Change for the better?

Heeding increasing calls from the ground to revamp the UUCA, proposed amendments to the act have been tabled. However, the grouses continue. "The amendments are not up to the expectations of the academic community as there are no fundamental changes to the character of the UUCA," says Prof Chin.

While the original Act states that students are not allowed to join any group outside university without the VC's permission, the proposed amendment has it that they are free to join anything except political parties, illegal groups and anything the VC deems unsuitable.

"Isn't that the same thing?" says Hishammuddin, laughing. "They are cheating themselves with such cosmetic changes."

Also, the amended Bill has redefined the term "student" to include post-graduate, post-doctorate and external students.

"Now, most post-grads are working people and have affiliations with professional or political bodies," says Dr Azmi. "Do they have to drop everything just because they've gone back to study? That's ludicrous."

He adds that the only real improvement in the proposed amendments is that students detained under the ISA are now allowed to continue their studies.

But Dr Syed Husin has this to say: "Lim Kit Siang and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim continued to study when they were detained. I continued to supervise my students when I was detained. There is no change.

"Also, a student can be suspended when charged with a registrable offence under the proposed amendments. How can he be punished before proven guilty?"

Dr Syed Husin, Hishammuddin and Hassan strongly suggest that the UUCA be scraped. Azmi points out that although there has been some improvement, "it isn't difficult to improve something so awful".

Future of student activism

Despite the many restraints that pull them back, university students have successfully organised themselves in recent years, as demonstrated in the general election and student elections on campuses.

The Internet is behind much of this as blogs and YouTube enable students to air their views freely. Also, students have successfully used the SMS and other instant messaging systems, to the same effect.

Technology aside, Prof Chin says society has changed greatly and university students are bolder today.

"University meant everything to poor students in the '70s. But now, many students come from more affluent backgrounds and private higher education is always an option," he adds.

Meanwhile, Dr Syed Husin argues that university students should be engaged in shaping the nation.

"The best thing about being involved is that students can be creative, critical and courageous to act when it comes to the truth," he says. "Also, it allows them to participate in the leadership process."

Hishammuddin is excited about the availability of new media; nevertheless, he stresses caution.

"Students nowadays might not be involved in a student union but technology enables them to form their own groups. However, this scenario does not enable ideas to be fully debated and it could be dangerous if some groups are too radical.

"Students must never forget that while they enjoy freedom and creativity with technology, they must also be responsible to themselves and society," he says.

Chinese paramilitary policemen patrolling the gates to Tiananmen Square, the scene of student protests in 1989. – AFP

Power to the students

WHILE things were relatively quiet in Malaysia, students overseas united to fight for what they believed in, and often achieved their goals. Below are some significant incidents of student activism.

1956 — Budapest, Hungary: Student protests, which started peacefully, soon attracted workers and this kick-started the Hungarian Revolution against the pro-Soviet government. The government was overthrown, but Soviet armed forces led by Marshal Ivan Konev soon moved in — with disastrous results.

1967 — Indonesia: Right-wing student groups staged demonstrations calling for the then president, Sukarno, to purge his government of communists. They later demanded his resignation. Sukarno resigned and was replaced by General Suharto.

1968 — Paris: Students of the Sorbonne protested against the closure of the University of Paris at Nanterre, following problems between the administration and students. This grew into a national insurrection when anarchists, communists and right-wing libertarian activists joined the students. Eventually, the demonstrators toppled the de Gaulle government.

1969 — Prague, Czech Republic: Large-scale protests against the Soviet invasion begin after Jan Palach, a student protestor, committed suicide by setting himself alight.

1970 — United States: Student protests against the invasion of Cambodia erupted following the Kent University shootings, at which four students were killed and nine injured.

1973 — Bangkok: Student protests turned violent after police impeded the crowds' dispersal. The military was called in and helicopters opened fire on Thammasat University. Students retaliated by using buses to ram tanks. The palace gates were opened to offer them sanctuary. King Bhumibol then ordered the leaders of the military junta to leave the country.

1978 — Teheran, Iran: A protest by Iranian students against the Shah served as the backdrop for the Iranian Revolution the following year.

1989 — Tiananmen, China: Thousands of students participated in a hunger strike at Tiananmen Square, demanding political and press reforms. The military was called in to crush the protests.