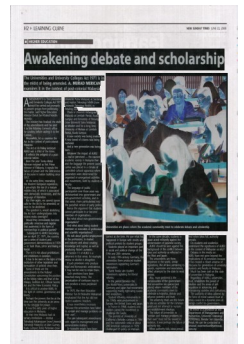


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Awakening debate and scholarship

The Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 is in the midst of being amended. **A. MURAD MERICAN** examines it in the context of post-colonial Malaysia



Universities are places where the academic community meet to celebrate debate and scholarship

A MENDMENTS to The Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 should be carried out promptly to prevent groups from politicising the matter, said Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin recently.

The ministry has finalised the draft of the amendments and has sent it to the Attorney General's office for scrutiny before tabling it to the Cabinet.

Meanwhile, let us examine the Act in the context of post-colonial Malaysia.

The Act or its Malay acronym AUKU was a child of the times.

It reflects the zeitgeist of a post-colonial nation.

Born the year Tunku Abdul Rahman resigned as first Prime Minister of Malaysia, it signals the failure of power and the deficiencies of discourse in nation building since 1957.

At the same time, resonating the Western European experience, it pre-empted the rise of a mature middle-class, of which is associated with democratic tendencies, and the language of liberation.

But then again, we cannot ignore calls for the Act to be amended, or even to be abolished.

The question is, would abolishing the Act turn undergraduates into violent mobs overnight?

Would they immediately become politically conscious and register that awareness in the form of memberships in political parties?

Subsequent to AUKU becoming law on April 27, 1971, the country saw a series of student anti-government demonstrations in 1974 — in Tasik Utara, Johor and Baling in Kedah.

The Act is not about prohibitions and inhibitions in isolation.

It has to be seen in the light of the institution of other legislation and formulation of policies since then.

Some of these are the amendments to the Federal Constitution concerning the position of the Malay rulers and that of the Malays, Sedition Act, Official Secrets Act and the New Economic Policy.

It is critical to analyse AUKU in the light of control, governance and liberty.

Perhaps the powers that be at the time saw the university as an arena for the struggle for power.

It was the early years of higher education in Malaysia.

At that time Malaysia had six tertiary institutions — Institut Teknologi Kebangsaan (now Universiti Teknologi Malaysia) at Jalan Gurney, Kuala Lumpur; Kolej Pertanian (now

Universiti Putra Malaysia) at Serdang; and Institut Teknologi MARA (now Universiti Teknologi MARA) in Petaling Jaya.

There is Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia at Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur and University of Penang (now Universiti Sains Malaysia) at Minden and for a long time, University of Malaya at Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur.

A new society was being created. A new breed of citizens was being nurtured.

And a new generation was being born.

Whatever the impact of AUKU — real or perceived — the nascent academic society in Malaysia then and the baggage the present society carries was placed in a climate of controlled cultural apparatus where parameters were determined for organised or unorganised activities and movements, both by students or faculty.

The language of public participation over those years was dichotomised into government and anti-government activities, and in that sense, more particularised into the parochial version of party politics.

Hence the argument that students cannot participate in or become members of organisations.

But what about non-governmental organisations?

And what about being student members or associates of professional and scientific organisations?

We talk about gainful employment in the professions, in market and industry and about creating knowledge and capital, as well as producing Nobel Laureates.

If Section 15 of AUKU is a deterrent in that sense, for example, review or abolish it altogether.

If such provisions only produce legal and bureaucratic ambivalence, it may not be wise to retain them.

Such provisions have been breached many times. The perpetuation of confusion may in turn produce a more perplexed society.

In 1975, the then Education Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad emphasised that the Act did not restrict academic freedom.

It was nevertheless necessary "because the universities have failed to contain and manage problems on their own".

This saw subsequent amendments with regard to management and administrative matters.

Dr Mahathir might have been

correct at the time. He saw what had happened in Europe with revolts and political protests by student groups.

Students played an important part in social and political change of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In early 19th-century Germany, the universities there produced student movements supporting German's nationalism.

Tsarist Russia saw student movements agitating for liberal reforms.

In the period between the two World Wars, universities in Germany and Japan had movements supporting mainly right-wing causes and revolutions.

Student left-wing movements in the 1960s were predominant in Europe, the United States and Japan.

In France in 1968, students and workers joined the movement to challenge De Gaulle.

The protests at University of California's Berkeley campus in 1964 and the nationwide strike at about 200 American campuses in 1970 challenged US policy on Vietnam.

In the same decade, students in Japan acted militantly against the westernisation of Japanese society.

AUKU should be seen against the background of the conflict between ideas and authority as reflected in the West and Japan.

The antecedents are there. Anywhere in the world, similar legislations, like all laws pertaining to speech, expression and associations, reflect attempts by the state to resist protest.

Also, more pertinent is the consciousness of the government that universities are spaces (and places) where members of the academic community meet to celebrate scholarship, debate and advance polemics and truth.

The university must use this forum to discuss activities for the common good and not attempt to nurture anti-establishment ideology.

The failure of universities to "contain and manage problems on their own" must not be viewed in isolation. It was perhaps the failure of authority too.

When authority fails, ideas prevail.

And when ideas fail, authority prevails.

Do students and academics understand the significance of AUKU in the context of Malaysian society?

Debates in the media on AUKU have not gone beyond the implications of its provisions because it has created a closed universe of discourse for generations of university students and faculty in Malaysia.

Much has been said on the state of universities in Malaysia.

Regardless of AUKU, universities must rehabilitate the power of idealism and the sense of self-regulation in advancing and maintaining societies and civilisations.

The authority of ideas ushered by the force of moral suasion must at times coexist in a dynamic state of benign conflict to governments.

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