



18 AUG, 2026

Students should be free to criticise govt: UMS lecturer

Daily Express (KK), Malaysia



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KOTA KINABALU: The repeal of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (AUKU) will only be meaningful if it is followed by changes in university administration culture, including strengthening institutional autonomy and guaranteeing academic freedom and diversity of views, according to two academicians.

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) senior lecturer Associate Professor Dr Romzi Ationg said academic freedom must be supported by clear guidelines to distinguish between academic freedom and responsibility.

"Academic freedom must be guaranteed through university autonomy, protection of differing views and clear guidelines distinguishing academic freedom, student activism and disciplinary violations within a mature and responsible democratic environment," he told Bernama.

He said students should have the space to criticise the government, university policies or political leaders based on facts and in a respectful manner without fear of disciplinary action but such freedom must be accompanied by responsibility, including respecting the law, maintaining public order and avoiding defamation, incitement and threats to security.

Romzi said that once AUKU is repealed, the limits of student freedom should not be determined unilaterally by the government or university administration, but should instead be based on clear laws, human rights principles and reasonable academic regulations.

He said checks and balances should be strengthened through genuinely autonomous university governance bodies, independent appeal procedures and transparent complaints mechanisms, while student representation was important to ensure justice and accountability.

"The repeal of AUKU does not necessarily mean unrestricted political freedom. Students should be allowed to engage in politics inside and outside campus, but remain subject to general laws, security regulations and academic principles. What is important is that such limits must be reasonable, clear, consistent and not used to silence criticism, in order to strengthen the country's democracy," he said.

Meanwhile, UMS political analyst Associate Professor Dr Syahrudin Awang Ahmad said the comprehensive repeal of AUKU had the potential to dismantle an autocratic administrative structure that had long been seen as restricting freedom of expression among certain groups, particularly university students.

However, he said the effectiveness of the move would depend greatly on the formulation of a new, transparent university law rather than merely rebranding the old legislation (AUKU),

while guaranteeing academic freedom for lecturers and students and requiring the government to separate executive powers from the appointment of top university leadership.

He said full autonomy should be given to university senates to manage academic affairs, research and the publication of scholarly discourse without political control, while guarantees for academic career security and the right to express fact-based views should be enshrined in writing.

"This holistic approach is necessary to ensure intellectual freedom continues to thrive within the campus ecosystem, rather than focusing narrowly on political freedom on campus alone," he said.

Syahrudin said the government and university administrations should also amend university statutes to ensure that differences of opinion were no longer dealt with through disciplinary punishment, but through intellectual discourse.

He said fair legal protection was important to develop a generation of students who were mature, courageous in critical thinking and capable of contributing constructive ideas towards national development.

Meanwhile, to ensure student movements remain free from political interference by the government or university administrations, Syahrudin said comprehensive, clear and focused checks-and-balances mechanisms should be established at both university and ministry levels.

"The key step is to establish a Students' Union that is legally and financially independent of university management and fully managed by students through transparent elections. I propose that the government establish an 'Independent Student Tribunal' or 'Higher Education Ombudsman' specifically to handle and resolve disciplinary disputes fairly and without prejudice," he said.

For UMS Faculty of Tropical Forestry student Sharmina Ibno Hasim, 21, the repeal of AUKU was a development that would allow students to express their views more openly.

"Previously, as students, we were bound by the Act, and I hope that after this we will be able to voice our views to ensure that the education system in our country continues to develop," she said.

Another student, Sharoll Swine Edward, 22, said the announcement was warmly welcomed, particularly among students who had previously been vocal on various issues.

"However, we hope the repeal of this Act will not be misused by students... students should not take advantage of it to express inappropriate views after the Act is repealed," she said. – Bernama



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SUMMARIES

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