Protest over new campus polls date

By AMINUDDIN MOHSIN
educate@thestar.com.my

ABOUT 50 Universiti Malaya (UM) Pro-Mahasiswa student representatives gathered at the university’s library and marched to its Chancellery to protest the campus election date from end of last month to September.

UM Student Council president Mohd Syahid Mohd Zaini said the students also brought a memorandum to hand over to UM deputy vice-chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni) Prof Datuk Rohana Yusof.

“We drafted this memorandum with the goal of preserving campus democracy which has been trampled upon by the university’s student affairs department,” he said after marching to the Chancellery.

The memorandum, he added, carried two demands. The first was to seek that the elections be held soon and the other was to seek the removal of executive caretakers appointed by the university’s Student Affairs Department as temporary student representatives. He claimed last week that nine out of 11 of the executive caretakers appointed were from the Pro-Apai camp, which is seen to be pro-establishment.

“The abrupt change of election dates without consulting us is undemocratic as we are university students and not kindergarten children,” said Mohd Syahid.

He added that without the elections there was no real student leadership, as the caretakers could only carry out what the (student affairs) department told them to do.

“The department may oversee student-related issues but they should not keep us in the dark when they make decisions,” he said, adding that students should be involved in decisions that affect them.

The students chanted “student power” and “hidup mahasiswa” outside the Chancellery as they waited to hand over the memorandum to UM’s deputy vice-chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni) Prof Datuk Dr Rohana Yusof.

Mohd Syahid was allowed to enter the Chancellery accompanied by another student leader Haziq Abdul Aziz. He later spoke to the gathering, claiming that Prof Rohana had turned down their demands.

About two weeks ago, Mohd Syahid said the department had announced that campus elections would be held at the end of the month, adding that the sudden change to September was announced on its Facebook page.

“We thought it was very unprofessional of them to inform us via Facebook instead of approaching us face to face or writing an official letter.

“Besides, we also felt that the excuses given for changing the election dates were unreasonable and seemed like a deflection from the truth,” he said.

The end of service for student representatives at public universities is usually between February or March, said Mohd Syahid, adding that UM’s student representatives finished their term on Feb 22.

Prof Rohana said last week that the change in dates for campus elections was not politically motivated.

She said it was due to the change of student intake from July to September, adding that it did not make sense to have elections now with exams only two months away and the semester break after that.

In a response to Prof Rohana’s statement, Mohd Syahid said that despite the short time span, there are still many issues that had to be sorted out, and lots of student activities to be carried out.

“We need the student representative council (MPP or Majlis Perwakilan Pelajar),” he said after marching to the Chancellery as they waited to hand over the memorandum to UM’s deputy vice-chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni). It is imperative because it is the definitive representation of the student body.

Resolving issues

“We have all kinds of issues that need to be resolved, from campus wifi problems to questionable campus regulations,” he said.

He added that the MPP had its own budget and even in a short period of time, there were activities that it could still carry out.

“The MPP also handles UM’s convocation. Without it, we can’t proceed with the preparations for the event.

“Executive caretakers cannot take charge of the actual duties of student representatives, so we are stuck,” said Mohd Syahid.

Around 100 students gathered at the Higher Education Ministry after Friday prayers last week to call on the ministry to advise the varsity’s administration to hold campus elections as soon as possible.

Prominent student leaders who joined the protest included Muhammad Safwan Anang and former MPP secretary Hawai Zakaria.

“We understand that UM is now an autonomous university and we are dealing with the university administration to hasten elections.

“But we would also like the ministry to advise not only UM but all universities nationwide to conduct campus elections by April,” said Mohd Syahid.

The Pro-Mahasiswa students, who are seen as anti-establishment, demonstrated with not only placards and banners but also a tombstone to signify the death of campus democracy.

“We brought the tombstone to hand it over to the Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, but his political secretary Khairi Abdul Malik only accepted our memorandum.

“The ministry officials think we are
childish because of the tombstone but it fails to realise that we wouldn’t have protested if the elections proceeded as originally planned,” explained Mohd Syahid.

He added that the Mohamed Khaled had conveyed that he would leave it to the university to determine campus election dates because he did not want to be dragged into the immature disagreement between students and the UM administration.

“The next step, ”Mohd Syahid said “will include an even bigger gathering of students soon”.

He claimed that Pro-Mahasiswa students conducted a study and found out that more than 60% of UM’s students wanted campus elections to be held immediately.