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UUCA'S repeal is a beginning, not an ending — Rabi'ah Aminudin



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Summary

- The article discusses the debate surrounding the repeal of the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) in Malaysia, emphasizing the need for true academic freedom, which is not reliant on ministerial discretion.
- It argues for an independent grievance mechanism, transparent and inclusive leadership, and academic freedom.
- The piece underscores the importance of a supportive environment for research and innovation.

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AUGUST 28 — Merdeka Day is around the corner, and it feels fitting that this debate is happening now. The spirit of 1957 was about the people deciding they were capable of governing, thinking, and speaking for themselves without needing anyone's permission first. 69 years on, that same spirit is what is missing from our lecture halls and staff rooms, and it is what this repeal has to restore if it is going to mean anything.

I was in the Dewan Tunku Canselor (DTC) on August 26, 2026, listening to the prime minister and the panellists which include the minister of higher education make the case for repeal in person and Khoo Ying Hooi's recent op-ed, "Anwar, you once had to break through UM's gates, now make sure no one else has to," put into words what I found myself thinking as I sat there. She made the case clearly: repealing the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) answers a legal question, not necessarily a cultural one. Academic freedom that survives only because a minister or vice-chancellor chooses to tolerate it isn't freedom but rather a discretion that can be withdrawn as easily as it was granted. Her point that the real test is the uncomfortable case, when academics are critical of the government and decision-makers, and her warning that junior, untenured academics carry the greatest risk while having the least protection, is exactly right. This risk grows as Malaysian universities replace tenured appointments with a contract-to-permanent scheme for their academics. So is her observation that UUCA was never the only lever of control; disciplinary rules, opaque promotion systems, contractual insecurity, and plain institutional habit can restrict academic freedom just as effectively without any statute at all.

Malaysia can remain untouched.

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The author argues that repealing UUCA must go beyond legal reform by creating independent safeguards, accountable university leadership and lasting protections for academic freedom. — Picture by Firdaus Latif

Where I would build on her argument is in what follows from it. Merdeka is not a mood we invoke once a year; it is a standard, and standards are kept by institutions, not sentiments. The

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group and the least visible in this debate. Reform needs transparent, appealable criteria for contract renewal and promotion where informal retaliation currently hides.

Leadership appointments should reflect the people they lead. Academics should have a real say in who becomes vice-chancellor or dean, with a guaranteed seat on the search committees through the academic staff associations and unions rather than a courtesy consultation. A leader chosen with the faculty answers to the faculty, while one appointed over their heads answers only upwards, and unaccountable leadership is where abuses of power take root. Faculties elected their own deans until UUCA was amended in 1975; academics have been organising to get that voice back ever since, and academic organisations such as GERAK grew directly out of that fight. The institutional memory exists. It should not be sidelined now.

The drafting of the legislation meant to replace UUCA should not be an echo chamber either. A new Act written by the same circle that administered the old one will reproduce its instincts, however good the intentions behind it. The committee shaping the replacement must include the people the Act will govern.

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what Merdeka asks of a lecture hall — not gratitude for freedoms granted, but institutions that no longer require anyone's permission to think out loud.

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