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'Anarchist' youths at rally sign of discontent, say analysts

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KUALA LUMPUR: The May 1 Workers Day arrest of 29 youths, six of whom were minors, shows the discontent some young people, who are politically aware, have against the government and Putrajaya should try to understand their sentiments, an academic and analyst said.

While some of the youths arrested, now released, said they believed their detention was meant to intimidate other youngsters, political analyst Ibrahim Suffian said the participation of youths in the rally to oppose the goods and services tax (GST) revealed the unhappiness felt by young people about the economy.

Academic Dr Khoo Ying Hooi said the current political landscape had allowed youth movements — some identifying themselves as members of the punk and anarchist subcultures — to thrive.

Khoo, from Universiti Malaya's Department of International and Strategic Studies, said political radicalism such as anarchism was not new in Malaysia, having emerged "when members of society cannot come to an agreement and there is antagonism in interests".

"The group in Malaysia is not big, but they are there and their decision to reveal themselves in the rally was a culmination of all their discontent towards authority," said Khoo, whose PhD thesis is on the rise of organised protest movements.

Hallmarks of these subcultures tend to include being anti-establishment and an emphasis on personal freedom.

Khoo said it would be pointless for the government to try to curb such movements, much like how extremists could not be totally eradicated, and added that anarchism existed all over the world.

He added that the crackdown on youths would likely fuel other young voters into protesting, rather than keeping them cowed.

"Now people are asking, why the need to remand them for four

nights? They have the right to protest."

The arrest last Friday began after the Workers Day rally ended peacefully, with the rounding up of the youths, in addition to activists and opposition politicians.

The six minors were released the following day, while 23 youths were remanded and released on Tuesday.

The youths allegedly set off smoke bombs and defaced signboards and public areas with spray paint. They were investigated under the Penal Code and the Corrosive and Explosive Substances Act.

Following the arrests and throughout their remand, a Facebook page called Pustaka Semesta posted updates on the detainees and issued calls to friends and supporters to gather in solidarity outside the Dang Wangi police headquarters where they were being held.

The page described some of those arrested as anarchists and showed punk scenes from Kuala Lumpur, Kuantan and Melaka. Two of those arrested told *The Malaysian Insider* after being released that they felt their detention was meant to deter other youths from protesting and curb the anarchist movement.

Another youth said he questioned the anarchy label used against them.

"This is a vague statement to make, they have to be more specific because since the European enlightenment, all these ideas are part of our modern society," he said, declining to give his full name, saying he feared for his safety.

Suffian said Putrajaya had to take a longer-term view to win back these youths.

He said the youth segment of the electorate was particularly affected by the implementation of the GST and the slowdown of the economy, compared with other groups.

"Many are stuck in low-paying jobs, some forced to compete with foreign workers and prices of homes are beyond the reach of many," said the director of independent pollster Merdeka Center.

— *The Malaysian Insider*