

By RUBIN KHOO
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MUCH of lawyer Edmund Bon's social activism work revolves around "citizen empowerment". Bon is determined to convince everyone to take an active interest in the law because it impacts them in their everyday life. It was the most important lesson he learnt from studying law in the UK.

"Studying the law in England opens my mind to how the law impacts people. These days many just read the law, pass exams and then go on to make a living but they don't see how law impacts you in your everyday life. Law is not just a subject, it's a life experience," says the 37-year-old lawyer who returned to Malaysia in 1997, and got involved almost immediately in defending Reformasi protestors in the 1998/99 rallies.

That was the start of his awareness of human rights issues here.

Bon's approach to social activism is to educate the public about their rights, and to convince them it is the individual's responsibility to know the law and how it applies to their daily lives.

One of his most crucial work is making the Constitution more accessible to the laymen.

Bon, who is currently the Bar Council's constitutional law committee chairperson, has been running the MyConstitution campaign to popularise the federal constitution among Malaysians.

"Everybody must understand the law," he says. "And everyone is under a duty to defend the Constitution. That's why we encourage people to understand the constitution."

Mainstreaming the issues, however, remains a challenge, but it is one that Bon and his counterparts are intent on overcoming.

Bon and his peers — Amer Hamzah Arshad, K. Shanmuga,

Empowering citizens

Lawyer Edmund Bon believes social activism should be our way of life.

Fahri Azzat, Sharmila Sekaran and Edward Saw — also started the LoyarBurok blog (Loyarburok.com) in 2006 which highlights legal issues of public interest. They wanted to present legal issues, but make it more accessible so that everyone could grasp what was happening in the country.

Since then the blog has evolved,

covering a range of issues from politics to popular culture but all with a critical slant which embodies the spirit of the blog. Along the way, "loyarburok" has also tried to present different sides of lawyers and the law.

"I think we have shown that lawyers are not stuffy," he says.

In his legal practice, Bon focuses on criminal defence, public interest litigation and human rights work.

"Being able to see how the law impacts us is far more stimulating than your run of the mill drafting of legal agreements."

Using the law to stand up for people's rights motivates Bon to continue his work in social activism.

"As lawyers we're meant to fight for human rights. The role of lawyers is governed by the Legal Profession Act, where we are specifically tasked by Parliament in Section 42 to uphold the course of justice without fear or favour. That's something Parliament has asked us to do under and that's something we must do."

Bon believes social activism should be part of our lifestyles, and he thinks Malaysians are ready to be more politically aware.

Recent events have also led to a growing interest among the young about human rights, hence it is important for there to be avenues that allows them to explore the issue.

"It's not true when people say that the youth is apathetic," he says. "It is just that we

didn't have outlets or avenues before but we have them now. We see a new youth coming

up, youth that won't take things lying down. It is up to us as lawyers and professionals to make it accessible for them."

Bon is also involved in the group UndiMsia that focuses on educating voters on issues about the electoral process. With greater access to social media, citizen action is becoming increasingly possible and that can be seen from the growing number of people involved in groups like UndiMsia and Loyarburok.

"These days anybody can be an author or publisher. You feel a sense of self-empowerment or self-ownership. Activism has become a lifestyle. You see a lot of new activists coming out and it's fulfilling to see the impact. When you call for a rally, you see all sorts of people coming out," says Bon who recently took part in the Bar Council's march against the then proposed Peaceful Assembly Bill, and also in a debate on the bill with Kedah Gerakan Youth chief Tan Keng Liang.

"We are trying to be constructive. We do it from our conscience and we are not breaking the law."

"Lawyers must find a way to educate people on their rights. In human rights work, the work is behind closed doors. There is a lot of drafting, thinking and mobilising, which is tough. It is not easy but it is fulfilling. That's why we will continue to do it," says Bon.



Edmund Bon is out to change things



Edmund Bon (right) during the debate with Kedah Gerakan Youth chief Tan Keng Liang (left).

