

Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh defends Alfian Sa'at amid Yale-NUS hullabaloo

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Professor Tommy Koh has spoken out in support of playwright Alfian Sa'at, after the latter was name-checked by Education Minister Ong Ye Kung in a speech he made in Parliament on Monday (Oct. 7).

The ambassador-at-large said in a Facebook post on Tuesday (Oct. 8): "We should not demonise Alfian Sa'at. He is one of our most talented playwrights. I regard him as a loving critic of Singapore. He is not anti- Singapore."

Possibly responding to Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung

Koh may have been referring to comments made by Minister Ong, who was fielding questions from MPs on the Yale-NUS case.

The university last month chose to withdraw a course titled "Dialogue and Dissent in Singapore", which Alfian would have led.

Koh continued: "I admire very much his plays, 'Cooling Off Day' and 'Hotel'. It is of course true that some his writings are critical of Singapore. But, freedom of speech means the right to agree with the government as well as the right to disagree."

Not the first time Koh has spoken out on tolerating criticism in Singapore

This is not the first time that Koh has spoken of the importance of tolerating criticism, and welcoming the contributions made by critics.

As a panelist at a dialogue at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference last week, Koh said he hoped the 4G leaders of the PAP would be able to welcome criticism, as long as the critics "love Singapore".

He was quoted saying: "The contestation of ideas is a necessary part of democracy. We should therefore not blacklist intellectuals, artists, writers because they criticise the government or hold dissenting views."

He also said the government should not have banned Tan Pin Pin's film, "To Singapore, With Love", or withdrew grants for Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* and Jeremy Tiang's novel *The State of Emergency*.

Koh added in his Facebook post that he felt he should defend Alfian "at this moment when he must feel discouraged and worried and friendless".

Meanwhile, Alfian himself called on critics speaking out against Ong's comments to avoid making derogatory personal attacks in comments against him.