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Death of decorum?

REPREHENSIBLE is too mild a word to describe the behaviour of the opposition MPs who indulged in 'street-brawling' at the first sitting of the Parliament. Such an action revolts sensibilities.

Elected representatives of all political persuasions should observe decorum, dignity and discipline. Misbehaviour will only weaken, if not debilitate, the functioning of the Parliament, the pillar of the country's democracy. Raucous parliamentary sessions, as characterised by name-calling, slinging matches and walkouts, will bring disrepute to the Dewan Rakyat. The House is the place for coherent and meaningful debates and exchange of ideas, not to inflame the baser instincts of politics.

Being obstructive to the hilt and staging a walkout, as the Opposition MPs did on Monday, is the antithesis of Parliamentary democracy. Opposition MPs, led by Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor, were unabashedly intent on reviling the Barisan Nasional-led Government by speaking mob language in the chambers of legislative power. The walkout is apparently intended as a show of muscle as the number of Opposition representatives this time has increased from 21 to 45. Unwittingly, they ended up subverting the parliamentary process and proceedings. And in doing so, they let down the very people who elected them and they betray their duties to serve the rakyat. For the Opposition MPs, these may be glory days indeed.

If they think they should be smirking in their corners, they should desist. Beyond the smug satisfaction of scoring a point, or so they think, these MPs have to address themselves to the question of what role do they want to play in Parliament. The role of rebel-rousers or of a check and balance to the ruling body and offeror of constructive criticism and ideas? They must remember that being an elected representative does not give them a ticket to engage in their political whims. As one of the guardians of our democratic polity, they should live up to their inherent promise. They must not lose sight of the principle that they are accountable to their constituents and the House, which is the forum for bringing about changes in the country. Nasty barbs and rhetorics can never be a substitute for substance.

The dissenting MPs' protest was over the legality of the first meeting of the 10th Parliament. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has explained that it was convened legally since the Yang di-Pertuan Agung had been properly advised to call for the meeting of the House by the then caretaker Government. If the Opposition MPs are not satisfied, they could have introduced a motion in the House. That they did not do so shows they are not at all conversant with Parliamentary practice and procedures. Or perhaps, they deliberately ignore the spirit and code of Parliamentary conduct. Their disrespect for the Speaker shows their disregard for the system which they are supposed to uphold.

Politics is, by right, noble. Alas, the Opposition MPs's pedestrian action shows that politics is the last resort of scoundrels. Sending Parliament in a tumult is an intimation of weakness, not strength. Not only is disruption of proceedings a waste of taxpayers' money, it may well lead to a crisis of governability. If MPs are allowed to get away with demeaning democratic institutions either by their ignorance or wilful neglect of their parliamentary duties, we fear nothing will remain sacrosanct again.

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