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Opposition MPs walk out (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Opposition MPs, led by Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor, refused to be sworn in and staged a 90-minute walkout from the Dewan Rakyat today after questioning the legality of the first meeting of the new Parliament.

They, however, returned and said they were taking the oath "under protest".

The action involved 43 of the 45 Opposition MPs.

The walkout prompted a sharp rebuke from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who said the meeting was legal and constitutional as it had been properly summoned.

Dr Mahathir and other Barisan Nasional MPs took the oath for the 10th Parliament before Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail.

But not before some drama created by the Opposition which held up proceedings for more than an hour as its members argued that today's meeting was illegal and unconstitutional.

They contended that since the Cabinet was only formed on Dec 14, and held its first meeting a day later, the Dec 13 notice about the convening of Parliament by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong was not valid as there was no Cabinet then to advise the King.

They were also unhappy over Mohamed Zahir's appointment, arguing that procedures were not followed. For instance, they claimed, MPs were not given a chance to submit their choice of candidate for the Speaker's post.

They staged a walkout when Mohamed Zahir dismissed their arguments and proceeded with the swearing-in.

However, the dissenting MPs returned 90 minutes later to take the oath.

Fadzil, who is also Pendang MP, informed reporters outside the House that they took the oath under protest.

He said they had no choice as refusing to be sworn in meant they would not be able to discharge their duties as parliamentarians.

Two MPs in the 193-member House were absent and will be sworn-in at a later date.

They are Marang MP and Terengganu Menteri Besar Abdul Hadi Awang and Dungun MP Mustafa Ali, both of Pas.

Dr Mahathir was sworn in as the Member for Kubang Pasu, followed by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was sworn in as the Member for Kepala Batas.

They were then followed by Cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretaries, backbenchers and Opposition members.

The swearing-in of the Opposition MPs was led by Fadzil, who is Opposition Leader.

He succeeds former Tanjong MP Lim Kit Siang who failed to win a seat in last month's general election.

The number of Opposition representatives this time has increased to 45. In the last Parliament, there were only 21.

Now, Pas has 27 MPs, the DAP has 10, Parti Keadilan Nasional has five and Parti Bersatu Sabah has three.

Mohamed Zahir, who has been Dewan Rakyat Speaker since 1982, was the only candidate nominated for the post.

The Prime Minister had earlier moved a motion that Mohamed Zahir be re-appointed to the post. It was seconded by Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

Mohamed Zahir then took his oath of loyalty and pledged to carry out his responsibility to the best of his ability. He thanked Dr Mahathir and the Government for their trust in him.

After congratulating the MPs on being elected to Parliament, Mohamed Zahir expressed hope that they would discharge their duties with full dedication and in accordance with the Standing Order.

"You all have a heavy responsibility ahead of you. I hope you carry it out well, like contributing constructive suggestions and ideas."

He expressed gratitude that the general election had been conducted well.

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