

20 DEC 1999  
Parliament-Speaker  
TUN ZAHIR RE-ELECTED DEWAN RAKYAT SPEAKER

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 20 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's 10th Parliament, formed after last month's general election, began sitting here today with the first business of the day of re-electing Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail as House Speaker for the fifth term.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad proposed his re-election and the motion was seconded by Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

Zahir was first made Speaker on June 14, 1982.

At the outset of the proceedings, Datuk Fadzil Nor (PAS-Pendang) rose to demand adjournment and questioned the legality of the sitting as Secretary to Parliament Datuk Mohamed Salleh Hassan read out a proclamation by Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah on the convening of the first session.

Fadzil asked: "Who advised the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to have Parliament to begin sitting today? This is a serious matter. According to clause 40 of the Federal Constitution, this meeting is illegal."

His pronouncement was followed by loud tapping of the table by the 43 MPs occupying the opposition bench.

Mohamed Salleh then stood up and replied that the normal practice has been that MPs could only take part in a debate after all members of the House have been sworn in.

Of the 193 seats of the 10th parliament, the Barisan Nasional has 148 and the rest are held by the opposition, namely PAS 27, DAP 10, Keadilan five and PBS three.

Fadzil then stood up again arguing that the notice calling for today's meeting of the House was issued on Dec 13 and the formation of the new federal Cabinet followed the next day.

"The new cabinet met for the first time on Dec 15. According to clause 40 (1) of the constitution, the king acts on the advice of the cabinet.

"In my reckoning, the cabinet only met on Dec 15 whereas the notice of the sitting was issued on Dec 13. The question is who advised the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to proclaim that parliament should sit this morning.

"As this involves provisions of the constitution, this is serious and this sitting is illegal and my advice is that it be dissolved," he said.

Several government back-benchers reacted spontaneously with some demanding Fadzil to sit down and others remarking sarcastically whether "(Lim) Kit Siang (former parliamentary opposition leader) had fully tutored him".

A slanging match ensued between about a dozen government and opposition back-benchers but the resulting cacophony made their arguments hardly intelligible.

This prompted Dr Mahathir to rise and informed the House that it was he who advised the Yang di-Pertuan Agong on the date for the first sitting of the new parliament.

"When parliament was dissolved the last government served as a care taker. As prime minister in the care-taker government, I have the prerogative to advise the king. We don't have to wait until a new government is formed," Dr Mahathir said.

Earlier, at least five opposition MPs stood up in protest and interrupted Mohamed Salleh as he was about to call Dr Mahathir to table a motion on the election of House Speaker.

Mohamed Salleh informed the House that in a letter dated Dec 3 from the prime minister on the tabling of the motion, there was only one nomination for Speakership, that is Zahir's

Despite the protestations by the opposition, Mohamed Salleh carried out with the business and called Dr Mahathir to formally nominate Zahir and Ling seconded the motion.

Mohamed Salleh then helped Zahir, who was seated next to the row of Cabinet members, put on the Speaker's songkok (headgear) and robes.

Upon occupying the Speaker's chair, Zahir set out immediately to ease tension.

Witnessed by a packed gallery of observers, government officers and members of the Press, Zahir appealed for order.

"Let there be some order. If the beginning is already like this, it bodes ill for the future," he said in obvious reference to some over-zealous MPs trying to raise points.

Zahir also explained that today's sitting was legal.

"I ask of you to observe the standing rules. Honourable members, you can't speak if you have not be sworn in yet," he said referring to the earlier slanging match between government and opposition members.

Referring to the Federal Constitution, Zahir said upon completion of the general election, any MP could submit a nominee to be House Speaker.

"Not necessarily from among cabinet members. Any member can nominate," he said.

The House then proceeded with its next business of the day that is the swearing in of MPs, starting off with Dr Mahathir, the MP for Kubang Pasu.

At this juncture, at about 10.30 am, all the opposition MPs present in the House walked out in protest over the legality of the sitting.

However, they re-entered the House at about 12.15 pm to take their oath of office.

-- BERNAMA

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