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When MPs were on best behaviour

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WHAT an eventful 36 days it has been in the Dewan Rakyat.

All kinds of events have taken place beginning with a walkout by the Opposition during the tabling of the Budget, challenges to a fist-fight between a backbencher and an Opposition member, to name-calling like ahli politik sarkas and a whole load of other incidents.

The last week at the Dewan Rakyat was definitely a week to remember as not only was it the last meeting for the year, but it was graced by the presence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Monday.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and almost all of the Cabinet Ministers were in the House that day.

The Opposition was definitely pleased with the presence of the entire Cabinet. They were delirious, surely, as all through out the meeting they were saying how important it was for the Prime Minister to be in the House.

On top of that Dr Mahathir was also needed to set a good example for Barisan Nasional MPs whose presence was being monitored by closed circuit television relayed to the Prime Minister's office in Putrajaya.

Dr Mahathir and the Cabinet stayed in the House the whole day that Monday to ensure that the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2000 which enabled the Federal Territory of Putrajaya to be established was passed.

Pleased with his presence was Dr Tan Seng Giaw (DAP-Kepong) who said Dr Mahathir should try to attend at least two sittings a week for at least a minimum of 15 minutes.

The Prime Minister's presence also brought obvious change to the Dewan Rakyat ... the attendance was the best so far as amendments to the Federal Constitution requires a two-thirds majority.

At the beginning of the session, 105 MPs were in the House - an impressive turnout compared to other days.

At one time, there were 14 Ministers in the House and more trickled in as the day wore on. The Deputy Ministers' bench was almost full.

This was a definite change compared to the usual empty seats at the Minister's bench or the daily headcount of 57, 89, 65, 28 and so on. Now how can the MPs keep it up is the question. It would also be interesting to see what kind of action BN's whip (Abdullah) and Dr Mahathir will take against MPs who have been playing truant.

After all ... Dr Mahathir did say those who constantly played truant would not be nominated for the next election.

The MPs were also on their best behaviour. There was not a squeak out of them unlike the usual calls of point of order 36(6) and so on.

There was also greater interest in the question-and-answer session as Dr Mahathir replied to questions from Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka) and Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (Keadilan-Permatang Pauh).

The Opposition mocked BN MPs for their higher than normal attendance, claiming it happened because the boss (Dr Mahathir) was around.

When Datuk Dr Hassan Ali (Pas-Parit Buntar) took the floor, verbal exchanges erupted several times between him and the backbenchers including Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis (BN-Rompin) and Datuk Mohd Zin Mohamed (BN-Shah Alam).

Mohamad Sabu (Pas-Kuala Kedah) likened this to the backbenchers trying to impress the Prime Minister, and appealed to Deputy Speaker Datuk Muhamad Abdullah to prevent BN MPs from interrupting Hassan.

To create more excitement, Mahfuz Omar (Pas-Pokok Sena) who was released from the prison last Friday made a grand entrance indeed.

Either he was deliberate in coming late or he timed his entrance but when Mahfuz entered the House that manic Monday he instantly caught the attention of members.

"Waaah" was the collective reaction from BN members (and the Press too actually) while Opposition members thumped tables.

The first reaction came from the Dr Mahathir who was holding the floor at the time Mahfuz made his grand entrance.

"Hero kita sudah sampai...sandiwara Hero, tahniah," Dr Mahathir said as Mahfuz saluted Dr Mahathir and gave the Prime Minister the thumbs up.

Shouts of banduan (convict) were also heard from the floor.

The excitement of Mahfuz's return spilled over to the Parliament lobby as Pressmen and fellow party members gathered round him to hear his stories and one-month experience in jail.

Mahfuz, who has earned a notoriety for needling BN members, said he missed them when he was serving his sentence.

"I read all that they said about me. Including their statements that I had neglected my constituency and failed in my duties as an MP by electing to go to prison rather than pay the fine."

To this Mahfuz said: "There are BN members who come to the House but never speak. And my constituents continued to receive service from my assistants."

Surprisingly, Mahfuz was rather sedate during daily sittings. He was always quick to jump up from his seat and put forth questions and quirky remarks. His fellow ringmate, Shahziman Abu Mansor (BN-Tampin), who was rather fiesty before the attempted fist fight was also quiet throughout the rest of the meeting.

Maybe time spent in jail has brought out a different side to Mahfuz as before that, he was seen to many as a hero and the light in the Dewan Rakyat with his loud orator's voice.

All in all it has been a good meeting ... the Budget was passed after days and days of debate and endless petty problems, and 14 Bills like the Supplementary Supply Bill, Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2000, Adoption (Amendment) Bill 2000 and Finance (No.2) Bill 2000 were seen through. Three new Bills were also passed. They were the Child Bill 2000, Energy Commission Bill 2000 and Pembangunan Sumber Manusia Berhad Bill 2000.

However, it must be noted that the last sitting on Thursday was awfully sullen. MPs looked so serious, or maybe they were tired. Its safe to assume that many were looking forward to the coming holidays.

Several MPs have established close ties with the Press corps and they do not hesitate to come into the Press room to chat, give ideas or hand out their answers or speeches. All these gestures are very much appreciated YBs! Keep it up.

A good ending then? For sure, and who knows what excitement is in store for the next meeting in 2001, tentatively set for mid-March.

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