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Debate turns ugly

reports on "Dewan Rakyat" by Ramlan Said; Brenda Lim
GOOD-NATURED ribbing turned into loud accusations and indignant cries for proof in a shouting match yesterday, forcing the Speaker to abandon his placating appeals and call for a time-out.

The squabble began when Pas' Jeli MP Mohd Apandi Mohamad took Information Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Senator Datuk Zainudin Maidin to task for describing RTM as the Government's official media which explained its policies.

"If RTM is a government propaganda tool as you said, why can't Governments in Kelantan and Terengganu use the radio's airtime to explain the States' development policies? Instead they are constantly attacked by RTM," he said.

Zainudin candidly reminded Apandi that he was in the opposition party, and it was the Barisan Nasional that was in power.

Spurred by the table-thumping of gleeful government backbenchers, Zainudin added that Pas would use the same tactics if it was in power and would even stop all newspaper publications.

This brought Pas members to their feet demanding for clarification, which was denied.

The situation returned to calm for a while, allowing BN's Larut MP Raja Datuk Ahmad Zainuddin Raja Omar to express his support for RTM for correcting skewed facts. He suggested that RTM invite apolitical figures to help in this effort.

On this, Zainudin promised to improve radio programmes and offered a conciliatory stance, hinting that it was time to "agree to disagree".

"Truth is where we stand," he said, adding that Pas held a different view of truth because of its position.

He said Pas was an extremist party and DAP had decided to break away from the Opposition Front when it could not support the idea of an Islamic state.

DAP members in the House were also trying to frighten the Chinese in the country about an Islamic state, but RTM's job was to expose DAP's tactics, he added.

Kota Melaka MP and DAP secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock then asked Zainudin to grant a request to air MCA leaders' views on Malaysia as an Islamic state, especially of Housing Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting who said that calling Malaysia an Islamic state was just "to handle Pas".

Zainudin said he read the newspapers every day and these views were already known.

Kerk shook his head, correcting Zainudin by saying that only Chinese newspapers had the report. When Zainudin insisted that it had been reported elsewhere, Kerk stuck to his request for airtime, calling out "RTM!"

While Pas and DAP members urged Zainudin to prove that his remarks were true, Bukit Mertajam MP Chong Eng was heard exclaiming: "You are not talking as a government officer. You are talking as an Umno member."

Speaker Tun Dr Mohamed Zahir Ismail then intervened and ordered the MPs to settle down, saying: "Cukuplah (That's enough), these matters won't end."

He told Zainudin to continue, advising him to stay away from controversial matters.

However, upon resuming his speech, Zainudin touched on another raw nerve

when he replied to a point raised by Pas' Parit Buntar MP Datuk Dr Hassan Mohd Ali who said the Government was using the media in a manner that was tak bermaruah (undignified).

"These allegations were baseless and too general ... without any specific examples," he said.

On the other hand, he said, Pas' publication, Harakah, had made "undignified" remarks such as saying that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad should be buried in a mausoleum.

Another shouting match ensued, with a dozen opposition members on their feet demanding for specific dates of the publications.

Zainudin said he would furnish the details the next day.

With no letting up of emotional outbursts, Mohamed Zahir issued a warning and abruptly left the House at 12.35pm.

The proceedings resumed 10 minutes later, with the Speaker reminding them to maintain the dignity of the House, do their duty and take into consideration each other's feelings.

Zainudin was told to continue winding up but to talk on other topics.

He continued, with a few interruptions, and was booed when he sat down.

The Speaker then told the MPs to control themselves, adding that it should not be like "watching a football match".

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