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ISA: `No need for referendum'

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DEPUTY Home Minister Datuk Zainal Abidin Zin said there was no need for a referendum to determine whether the Internal Security Act was supported by the people.

He said this when replying to Abdul Rahman Yusof (Keadilan-Kemaman) who challenged the Government to conduct a referendum to gauge public support for the Act.

Zainal Abidin, winding-up on points raised by MPs debating the Eighth Malaysia Plan, had his hands full responding to queries on the arrests of 10 reformasi leaders under the ISA, which the Opposition claimed had been carried out to silence dissenting voices.

He had to decline requests for clarification from MPs including Mahfuz Omar (Pas-Pokok Sena,) reasoning that much had been said on the matter.

The ISA was also the topic of conversation in the lobby when the wives of those arrested came to submit a memorandum to Opposition Leader Datuk Fadzil Noor.

They want Parliament to debate the matter and adopt a resolution urging the police to grant access to those detained.

A copy of the memorandum was also submitted to Speaker Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail. It was accepted by one of his staff.

Later, they conveyed their demands to Zainal Abidin whom they managed to `corner' in the canteen.

The Deputy Minister said he would take them to the Ministry.

Earlier in the House, Zainal Abidin said the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) would be given access to the detainees once police investigations had been completed.

He said immediate family members would also be allowed to visit them.

He was responding to Fadzil (Pas-Pendang) who asked why no one had been allowed to meet the 10 who had been in detention for more than 21 days.

Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi (Pas-Kuala Terengganu) criticised Zainal Abidin for supporting the ISA now when at one time he had been among its strongest critics. Zainal Abidin was a former leader of the now-defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46.

He added that the use of the ISA showed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was a dictator who had ordered the arrests to protect his interests.

Zainal Abidin replied: "If Dr Mahathir were a dictator, I would be among the first to be arrested (then) because I was a fierce critic of the Government. But I was not arrested ... it was because I had not committed any wrongdoing. Likewise, these people have been arrested, not because they are from the Opposition, but because they broke the law."

The Deputy Minister reiterated that the arrests were preventive and were made to facilitate investigations into activities deemed detrimental to the country.

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