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Islamic state issue dominates

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AS expected, the Budget 2002 debate this week was dominated by the Islamic state issue, with Barisan Nasional and Opposition MPs trying their best to demolish each other's argument.

BN members were united in saying that Malaysia was already an Islamic state while Pas and DAP MPs maintained that no changes had been made to the country's secular Constitution.

The first salvo was fired when Opposition leader and Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor (Pas-Pendang) outlined the criteria of an Islamic administration during his speech. He argued Malaysia had not fulfilled this, hence it could not be regarded as an Islamic state.

Fadzil questioned Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's declaration that Malaysia was an Islamic state, claiming it did not change anything as the Constitution still recognised the country as secular.

If backbenchers found themselves on the receiving end during Fadzil's speech, the tables were turned when Datuk Ruhanie Ahmad (BN-Parit Sulong) took the floor. He wasted no time bringing to Fadzil's attention the admission by one Pas MP that Malaysia was an Islamic state.

The Pas MP referred to is Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi (Pas-Kuala Terengganu) who made the remark when tabling a motion condemning the United States attack on Afghanistan last week.

"Fadzil should state publicly whether to accept or reject the stand of his MP. If Syed Azman's statement is not denied, then the party is admitting that Malaysia is an Islamic state."

Ruhanie offered his opinion. "Subconsciously, the MP recognises Malaysia as an Islamic state but as a Pas member, he has to toe party lines which reject such a contention."

Datuk Mohamad Aziz (BN-Sri Gading) opined that Pas refused to admit that Malaysia was an Islamic state as it was the only political issue left for it to exploit.

"Once the people, especially Malays, accept Malaysia is an Islamic state, Pas will be in serious trouble."

He felt this explained the party's continuous opposition despite the Muslim world's recognition of Malaysia as a model of an Islamic state.

Another issue that gained much attention was the call by some backbenchers for Dr Mahathir to sack non-performing ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretaries and top civil servants.

After the call was made last week - but no names mentioned - it started the guessing game on who the MPs were referring to.

Such an outburst was uncommon in the Dewan Rakyat, prompting some to claim that the MPs acted on orders from higher-ups.

Whether there was a directive or not, the Government showed its concern. Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was also the BN Whip, summoned all backbenchers to a meeting on Monday.

It was learnt that among the main items discussed was the attack against the Ministers.

Abdullah reportedly advised MPs to raise any dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister first, instead of turning the Dewan Rakyat into a bashing ground.

He said MPs could forward their complaints directly to Dr Mahathir.

Another headache for Abdullah was the poor attendance among MPs, a perennial problem unresolved over the years.

Warnings from party leaders that those playing truant would not be selected to re-contest their seats seemed to have fallen on deaf ears.

Even the revelation that Dr Mahathir was able to monitor Dewan Rakyat proceedings from his office in Putrajaya had failed to convince MPs to turn up more regularly.

There are two types of MPs in the House - members who attend sittings regularly and take part in debates, and those there to warm their seats.

This may be shocking but there are several Yang Berhormat who have yet to utter a single word since the 10th Parliament commenced two years ago.

The only consolation was their better than average attendance record compared to other YBs. Sights of MPs nodding off in their seats were also quite common. Some even snored. One trait among MPs contributing to the low number of representatives in the House was their habit of leaving after delivering their speeches.

Needless to say, at the end of the day's proceedings, only a handful of members would be around.

Besides their fixed monthly allowance, MPs are rewarded quite handsomely for attending sittings - they are paid RM150 daily.

On top of that, they are eligible to a RM100 daily subsistence allowance, hotel (RM200++ daily) or alternative lodging (RM80 daily), and mileage claims at 60 sen per km.

It is fortunate that the poor attendance has not affected proceedings. Quite often, there is a lack of quorum (26 MPs) in the House but the Speaker will only adjourn proceedings if the matter is raised by a member.

"We do not want to create unnecessary trouble," said one Opposition MP when asked why the regular lack of quorum was not brought to the attention of the Chair.

A backbencher said all MPs, including those holding Government positions and the Opposition, were duty bound to attend sittings.