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Lawmakers risk creating a `vulgar house'

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IT is worrying to see how easily some lawmakers lose their temper, as was the case on Wednesday when Barisan Nasional Kinabatangan MP Datuk Bung Moktar Radin hurled a four-letter word twice across the floor during a heated argument with the Opposition.

Bung Moktar and several backbenchers were unhappy with Chong Eng (DAP-Bukit Mertajam) who touched on the concept of an Islamic state.

Many of those in the House did not hear the profanity because the situation then resembled that of a market, with a number of MPs trying very hard to burst their lungs by shouting and trading insults with each other.

But disbelief could be seen on the faces of those who heard it, apparently not expecting such language from MPs, the people elected by the rakyat to give voice to their aspirations and champion their interests.

Some say this is the first time such a word has been uttered in the House by an MP, and if the trend is left unchecked, the Dewan Rakyat might one day turn into a boxing ring.

Such a scenario is not far-fetched. Last year, a backbencher and an Opposition MP challenged each other to a fist-fight when a debate got out of hand.

Verbal clashes between BN MPs and the Opposition are becoming regular events in the current Parliament (some attributed this to the higher number of Opposition MPs, who have doubled from 20 to 45).

But one does not have to raise his voice to convey a message as demonstrated by some MPs such as Datuk Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah (BN-Tambun) and Husam Musa (Pas-Kubang Kerian).

Wednesday's incident has tarnished the image of the august House. MPs will have themselves to blame if the public perceives them as a rowdy and undisciplined lot, having no qualms about trading insults and profanities.

Being seasoned politicians - some of them elected for several terms - one would expect them to be the last people to lose control of their emotions.

Politicians are supposed to be "hardened" people. They are used to listening to and making fiery speeches, being accused of wrongdoing or slandered by their opponents. They are also not expected to be easily provoked or intimidated.

Hence, there is no excuse for Wednesday's behaviour, in which Bung Moktar claimed he was provoked by an Opposition MP who showed him an obscene gesture.

Provocation or not, resorting to obscene language to vent one's anger is unjustifiable.

Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka), who feels Bung Moktar has brought disrepute to the House and tarnished the image of fellow MPs, offers his views.

"Errant MPs will escape scot-free if provocation is accepted as a defence. The next time someone misbehaves, he can say he was provoked ... this is absurd."

MPs are elected to the Dewan Rakyat to formulate and pass the country's laws, not to trade insults with each other. Decorum must be observed at all times. Any debate in the House should be conducted in an orderly manner.

It is expected that MPs from both sides will disagree on many issues,

but this does not give anyone the licence to be rude or vulgar.

Even the mild-mannered Deputy Education Minister Datuk Aziz Shamsuddin blew his top on Thursday when Pas MP for Kuala Terengganu Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi accused him of being the "king-maker" when it came to awarding contracts for school projects.

Apparently unable to control his anger, he ticked off Syed Azman for being kurang ajar (ill-bred), before calling the Pas MP bangsat (scum).

The remark did not go down well with the Opposition bench, especially Mohamad Sabu (Pas-Kuala Kedah) who instantly jumped from his seat to protest. The situation was brought under control when Deputy Speaker Datuk Muhammad Abdullah told Aziz to retract his remark, saying it was not an appropriate word to be used in the House.

The Deputy Minister did as he was told but defended his action, saying he could not tolerate people making unfounded allegations.

Speaker Tun Mohamed Zahir Ismail said he was saddened that an MP had uttered the four-letter word.

He said there was no question that Bung Moktar would have to retract his remark and apologise to the House, which he did on Thursday after being directed by the Chair, albeit reluctantly.

However, no remorse was shown and he did not say he regretted his action, which was even more regrettable.

And in the process of making the apology, he triggered another row which forced Mohamed Zahir to adjourn proceedings for 10 minutes as emotions were running high.

Bung Moktar, who was holding the floor debating the Supplementary Supply Bill 2001, claimed he had apologised during the morning session but this was disputed by the Opposition, which said he only made a retraction.

The disagreement soon degenerated into a shouting match with words like samseng (thugs), biadap (ill-mannered) and diam (shut up) flying loose between both sides.

Mohamed Zahir acted speedily by adjourning the House. When it resumed later with Deputy Speaker Datuk Lim Si Cheng in the chair, order was restored with Bung Moktar continuing where he left of.

The Kinabatangan MP and several backbenchers found a common theme when debating the Bill. They called on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to sack Ministers and other members of the Government and civil servants who failed to perform.

They felt non-performing MPs should also be given the boot. Perhaps the list should also include rowdy lawmakers.

Commotion aside, the House approved the Supply Bill which sought an additional RM1.5 billion for six ministries and agencies.

On Friday, the Budget 2002 was tabled by Dr Mahathir, who is also Finance Minister.