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Open season in judicial turkey shoot

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AS senior members of the judiciary, serving and retired, slug it out in the open, the people will have a rare opportunity to judge the judges.

Hopefully, no lawyer or legal association will cow them with threats of contempt of court.

To begin with, it was not the ordinary mortals who started the turkey shoot. It was not them who brought out the judicial laundry to be washed in public.

It all started with a High Court judge in Sabah, Datuk Muhammad Kamil Awang, who made an extraordinary allegation that he was told to drop an election petition case involving the Likas seat.

It is indeed a rare outburst. And it is no wonder that it has now become a police case.

His statement has caused the public to cast suspicious eyes on the Government as the State Assemblyman who lost the seat as a result of the petition, Datuk Yong Teck Lee, was a Government member.

This forced the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, to deny involvement. The judge later said neither the Prime Minister nor his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was responsible.

He said only his superiors in the judiciary could have done so. The public's attention was drawn to three key figures in the judiciary - the Chief Justice, Tan Sri Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah, his predecessor, Tun Mohd Eusoff Chin and the Chief Justice of the High Court of Sabah, Tan Sri Chong Siew Fai.

Dzaiddin was quoted by the Press as saying that he had been informed of the identity of the "mystery caller".

Chong was quoted as saying: "I don't see why I should respond to such a vague and unspecified accusation."

But Eusoff did say that he called Mohammad Kamil but only to ask him to speed up the case.

To which Mohammad Kamil responded by saying that such an instruction, if any, should have been made through his superior in Sabah.

He said Eusoff should not have urged him to speed up the case as when the call was purportedly made, the case was still in the preliminary hearing stage.

As the exchanges rage on, the Law Minister Datuk Rais Yatim has described as "abnormal and objectionable" for Muhammad Kamil to raise personal problems in his judgment like his son failing to get a temporary job in a Government department and about his daughter applying for a scholarship to pursue a one-year postgraduate course.

At the rate the issue is developing, it may not be politically (or is it judicially?) incorrect to say that the otherwise sedate and decorous judiciary has made a highly harsh indictment of itself.

It cannot now blame the Press for playing up the issue and the people for no longer treating the judges as special people.

Surely the much touted independence of the judiciary does not include judges slugging it out with each other in the pages of the newspapers.