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Lim and Tan's behaviour over PORR vote puts party in a pickle

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THE future of the two Barisan Nasional wakil rakyat Lim Boo Chang (MCA-Datuk Keramat) and Tan Cheng Liang (MCA-Jawi) now hangs in the balance.

Going by precedent - not one but two - the "crimes" committed by the duo are punishable by expulsion from the ruling coalition.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not mince his words on the matter.

He described the duo's actions, during the last day of the State Legislative Assembly sitting, as a serious breach of BN discipline.

For the two precedents on such breach of discipline one must go to the Sabah State Legislative Assembly in 1996.

In that year, Gerakan had to sack its Sabah pro-tem chairman Datuk Kong Hong Ming for not supporting the Sabah BN-sponsored Sabah Forestry Enactment (Amendment) Bill aimed at reducing the administrative powers of the Chief Minister.

Later in the same year, Sabah nominated backbencher Jahid Jahim was expelled for voting against a State Government Bill to amend the Forestry Enactment in the Legislative Assembly.

A political observer said there was only one way of dealing with the issue.

He feels Lim and Tan have committed the "cardinal political sin" and must pay for it.

Lim, a lawyer by profession and a former Penang Gerakan member who crossed over to the MCA after the 1999 general election, chose to keep mum about why he abstained during the vote on a motion tabled by a DAP State Assemblyman.

The motion was to defer the construction of the proposed RM1.02 billion Penang Outer Ring Road (PORR) last week.

Tan, the lanky former State basketball player and a seasoned Wanita MCA leader, said she was merely protecting the people's interest.

As such, she chose not to lend support to her 19 BN colleagues, including State MCA deputy chairman Datuk Koay Kar Huah and its secretary, Datuk Loh Hock Hun, to reject the motion.

Why the two backbenchers did what they did, or did not do what was expected of them, is a foregone conclusion.

Lim and Tan have drawn a lot of flak for not voting against the motion, tabled by the first-term DAP representative, Law Heng Kiang.

Many among those from the ruling party, who spoke on the errant backbenchers' actions, have demanded their heads for refusing to toe the line.

However, a "No-PORR" group has come to Lim and Tan's support. It claimed the duo were right in exercising the trust given by the rakyat who are concerned with the viability of the 17km bypass highway.

The Penang MCA, however, has provided little comfort to the duo.

Its State chief, Wong Kam Hoong, did say the party had no stand on PORR and blamed it on the lack of information on the ring road.

He also claimed the party was concerned over the complaints of people about the project.

But Wong, said a backbencher, should also realise that Lim and Tan were well aware of the motion because they and 26 other backbenchers had been briefed on the matter by Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon five days earlier.

Wong, the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Parliamentary Secretary, who assumed the party chief post recently, could have reminded the duo to follow instructions.

And the State BN whip in the House, Datuk Dr Hilmi Yahaya, had confirmed that Lim and Tan were present at the pre-State Assembly briefing.

But, to everyone's surprise, Lim and Tan chose to abstain when the motion was tabled before House Speaker Datuk Yahaya Abdul Hamid.

As soon as DAP's Law raised the motion, Parti Keadilan Nasional's Abdul Rahman Kadir (Penanti) called for individual voting, one which required every assemblyman to rise and state his or her stand.

Only 21 backbenchers were present when voting was conducted and all, except for Lim and Tan, voted against the motion while Law got support from Abdul Rahman and Pas assemblyman for Permatang Pasir, Mohd Hamdan Abdul Rahman.

Much to their colleagues' chagrin, Lim and Tan remained glued to their seats.

Eight other backbenchers had either left or were absent when the voting was carried out. One of them, Lim Gim Soon (MCA-Kampung Kolam) claimed he was in the lavatory and said he would have voted against the motion if he was present.

According to another political observer, Lim and Tan's behaviour now poses a more serious concern to the BN State Government, led by Koh, than the bypass highway itself.

PORR can be replaced or shelved altogether, since the Federal-funded project has yet to get off the ground, he said.

He stressed Lim and Tan had committed a serious offence which is unforgivable.

To let them off the hook will set another precedent and a bad one at that, he added.

If the Gerakan expulsion of its representatives in Sabah is anything to go by, the Opposition failed to make much headway in exploiting the sackings.

Sabah BN instead emerged stronger during and after the last general election.

For now, Lim and Tan have been slapped with a gag order pending a full investigation by the MCA central committee while Koh and his deputy, Dr Hilmi, have submitted their reports on the matter to BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The question now is whether the MCA will be forced to swallow the same bitter pill which Gerakan had to six years ago.