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Bill for new seats passed

reports on "Dewan Rakyat" by Ramlan Said; Sujatani Poosparajah
THE Dewan Rakyat passed an amendment to the Federal Constitution yesterday to increase the number of parliamentary constituencies from 194 to 219.

When the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2003 was put to a vote after a half-day debate, 149 MPs supported it while 35 members opposed.

The number of representatives supporting the Bill surpassed the two-thirds majority required for any amendment to the Constitution to be passed. Two-thirds in the 194-member House is 128.

Among those who took part in the voting were Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Cabinet Ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretaries and backbenchers.

The Opposition stayed on to take part in the voting, unlike in April when they staged a walk-out when the Election Commission sought approval from the House to its proposal on the redelineation.

Several backbenchers taunted them, calling out "keluarlah, keluarlah" but the Opposition MPs did not take the bait.

Besides the 25 new parliamentary seats, the commission has also proposed the creation of an additional 63 State seats. Amendments to the State constitution will be carried out by the respective legislative assemblies.

Dr Mahathir, in tabling the Bill for second reading in the morning, said the redelineation resulted in constituencies covering a big area and having a large number of voters reduced in size and number respectively.

This, he said, would enable the elected representatives to serve their constituents better.

The Prime Minister said constituencies small in size but having a large number of voters were also affected in the exercise.

The Opposition protested the amendment, claiming the Election Commission had failed to adhere to certain regulations outlined in the drawing up of the new constituencies.

They also charged that the redelineation favoured the Barisan Nasional, saying States controlled by Pas like Kelantan and Terengganu did not get any new seats.

Datuk Mustafa Ali (Pas-Dungun) proposed an amendment to the Bill, seeking to further increase the number of parliamentary seats in Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Perlis and Terengganu. But this was rejected when only 34 members supported it.

Earlier, winding up points raised by MPs, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said fewer MPs took part in the debate, concluding that this was because many had debated the matter when it was first tabled in the House last April.

However, he criticised the Opposition for moving its own amendment although it had boycotted the commission's proposal earlier.

He also explained why Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu did not get any new seats under the exercise.

For Kelantan, Rais said the number of voters in parliamentary seats in the State was consistent with the average national statistics.

"Moreover, every year, many of its people migrate to other States in search of jobs."

Rais clashed briefly with Mahfuz Omar (Pas-Pokok Sena) when the latter accused the commission of being partial towards the Government and Umno.

