

15/03/2003

Mohd Zin sets new record with six-hour speech in Dewan Rakyat

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THEY say the job of a politician is to speak but Backbenchers Club chairman Datuk Mohd Zin Mohamed gave the word new meaning when he took six hours to debate the Royal address.

The Shah Alam MP's marathon monologue, recalled some long-serving MPs, was perhaps the longest-ever speech delivered in the Dewan Rakyat.

"It is understandable ... he is like a new broom," said one member in reference to Mohd Zin's appointment as BBC chairman last year, succeeding Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis who was made Second Finance Minister.

The Chair usually limits the time for MPs to deliver their speeches but not in Mohd Zin's case as he was the first speaker debating the Royal address.

By convention, the member moving a motion of thanks on the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's speech at the opening of Parliament has the luxury of holding the floor for as long as he wants.

That privilege is also extended to the Opposition leader but Datuk Seri Hadi Awang, who is also Terengganu Menteri Besar and Marang MP, had to cut short his speech because he had to attend the Conference of Rulers.

Dewan Rakyat watchers would remember a somewhat similar occurrence during the 9th Parliament several years ago when Datuk Mohd Ali Rustam took to the floor for six hours but it was not a speech.

Rather, the marathon reply was due to a slipup in the order of the day.

Mohd Ali, then Deputy Health Minister, had to hold the floor till the end of the day's session - six hours in all.

Had Mohd Ali, now Malacca Chief Minister, finished earlier, the next item on the agenda was a motion on apostates by Hadi.

One MP who could no longer bear the long wait for the BBC chairman to complete his maiden speech was Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka) who complained to the Chair that the Shah Alam MP was taking too long.

He said such a thing had never happened before and Mohd Zin was clearly abusing the privilege extended to him as first speaker on the Royal address.

"Do not abuse the process. Please stick to the convention," he rued.

Another opposition MP was more cynical, saying that Mohd Zin's performance may be connected to acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi's recent statement on choice of candidates for the forthcoming general election.

"The acting Prime Minister has stressed that the performance of MPs and their qualities as orators might be used as a yardstick in choosing candidates for the general election. Mohd Zin is just showing the way how it should be done."

The Shah Alam MP would not have taken the whole Tuesday and the larger part of Wednesday morning to end his 51-page speech if not for the various interjections and verbal clashes with Opposition MPs.

One case in point was the heated debate over the Government's decision to end per capita funds for Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR).

In fact, the SAR issue dominated this week's proceedings, which often saw both sides of the divide engaged in shouting matches.

The Chair had a trying time restoring order, and at one point, Deputy Speaker Datuk Lim Si Cheng warned MPs not to test his patience.

"Please abide by the regulations. If not, I will be forced to evict you from the House."

The backbenchers have been anticipating an onslaught from the Opposition, particularly Pas, on the issue.

"We have been told to be prepared to engage Pas on this. They will not have a field day running down the Government," pledged one BN representative.

Most vocal among the Opposition ranks was Mahfuz Omar (Pas-Pokok Sena) who demanded that the Government come clean on the matter.

"It is unfair for all SAR to be punished when only one or two have deviated from the true teachings of Islam.

"If a policeman is found to be corrupt, do we have to close all police stations?"

Countered Mohd Zin: "The Government does not oppose SAR, but it is against the spreading of a culture of hatred."

He recounted a personal experience. "I have seen myself how a seven-year-old relative of mine says ini orang jahat (this is a bad person) when shown a picture of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad."

He told the Pas MPs that it was appalling for the party to poison the minds of children in the name of politics.

While both sides clashed over SAR, they closed ranks in opposing war in Iraq and attempts by the United States to dominate the world.

Proceedings on Tuesday was adjourned for one hour to enable members to debate a motion on Iraq. And the person in the limelight was, once again, Mohd Zin who tabled the motion.

Dah tak ada orang lain ke ... (Isn't there anybody else)?," was a comment heard from the Opposition bench when the Speaker invited him to move the motion.

Mohd Zin replied: Dah rezeki, apa nak buat. (Already my lot, what can I do).

On the sidelines, Pressmen covering Parliament got a pleasant surprise when told that refreshments would be provided for them daily, courtesy of the Information Department.