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Rais floors House with `pantun' exchanges over electoral changes

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MINISTER in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Rais Yatim is a polished speaker, a fact acknowledged by many.

But on Tuesday, when winding up a motion to change the electoral boundaries, the Jelebu MP revealed he was also a master of the traditional Malay pantun.

After the monologues and sometimes fiery speeches from 22 Members of Parliament who were debating the motion tabled a day earlier by acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, it was in-deed refreshing to hear the strings of pantun.

What's remarkable was his ability to recite from memory. More importantly, they answered queries posed by the lawmakers.

A veteran MP remembered Pas member Hashim Gera who awed the House in the 70s with his pantun.

"His speeches then were literally a series of pantun," said the BN member.

The first pantun recited by Rais was directed at the Opposition, namely Datuk Hassan Ali (Pas-Parit Buntar), for their scathing criticism of the Election Commission, which proposed the new boundaries.

He said it was regrettable that there was not even one a word of thanks from the Opposition on what the commission had done all this while.

Rais mourned: "Diperah sudah, dicuci sudah, bersih saja yang belum. Dimarahi sudah, dicaci sudah, berterima kasih saja yang belum."

It was a while before Hassan came up with his pantun, a fact not lost on the minister who remarked that the Pas member needed some time to "draft" his reply.

Hassan answered: "Pokok selasih di Kota Belum, ditebang mari anak Pak Mat, terima kasih saja yang belum, kerana Umno parti pengkhianat."

It caused an uproar among back-benchers.

Rais fired another pantun in response to Husam Musa's (Pas-Kubang Kerian) veiled reference to his infamous "I have burnt my bridge with Dr Mahathir" remark.

(Rais, who was once a top leader of the now-defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46, made the remark when severing all ties with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad).

Husam said there must be some basis to justify the proposed changes to the electoral boundaries. "The minister is duty-bound to reply, if not, all our bridges will be burnt," he boomed out to cheers from his colleagues.

Rais received a louder applause when he told the Opposition to mind their own business and that they should not lose sleep if Dr Mahathir wanted to rebuild the burnt bridge.

When the Opposition continued to heckle and harass him, Rais said this was a perennial problem with the MPs, and there was a pantun for such a behaviour.

"Nobat rebana dendang perantau, rakit sehaya putus tali, ubat kena pantang terlampau, penyakit lama datang kembali."

The Opposition was floored when Rais cited another pantun after Hassan repeatedly demanded a clarification.

"Salai ciku dan kedondong, salai ikan atas para, bukan salah ibu mengandung, salah badan buruk pinta."

Rais told the Opposition bench that he would try to reply to all

questions raised on the Election Commission's proposal to create another 25 parliamentary and 63 state seats, but cautioned he could not do much to convince those who chose not to be convinced.

There was also a pantun for this. "Tidak dapat kehendak padi, kehendak bilah jua yang berlalu, tidak dapat kehendak hati, kehendak Allah jua yang berlaku."

The House erupted in laughter when Dr Tan Seng Giaw (DAP-Kepong) joined in the fray with his pantun, but it did not hit the mark.

Rais capped his windingup with, what else, a pantun, but this time a six-line rhyme instead of the usual four.

"Kalau berdentum di gunung daik, itulah tanda orang memerun, berhimpunlah kita anak beranak, kalau tersentuh waktu turun, dan kena waktu naik, berilah ampun banyak-banyak."

When the motion was put to the vote, the Opposition staged a walkout as a sign of protest, claiming the Government had rushed to get the House's endorsement.

Kerk Kim Hock (DAP-Kota Melaka) insisted the three Opposition parties in the House - Pas, DAP and Parti Keadilan Nasional - did not plan the boycott, saying it was only done after they concluded the Government was only interested to bulldoze the motion through.

"They have the numbers, so they act without much consideration of other people's views."

The vocal Mohamad Sabu (Pas-Kuala Kedah) charged that the EC had blatantly ignored three core principles in drawing up the new parliamentary constituencies, namely increase in population and geographical and socio-economic changes.

For the record, 144 BN MPs voted in favour of the proposal, paving the way for an amendment to the Federal Constitution which will be tabled in the June sitting.

With the amendment, the 194-strong member House will have an additional 25 MPs after the next general election.

On Wednesday, some backbenchers could not resist taking a swipe at the Opposition for their antics on Tuesday.

Datuk Mohamed Aziz (BN-Sri Gading) interrupted Datuk Kamaruddin Jaffar (Pas-Tumpat), who was holding the floor and had mentioned warriors in his speech.

"YB Tumpat is my good friend and a panglima (warrior) ...I do not intend to quarrel over that. But warriors do not walk out" he said to table-thumping from other backbenchers.

Another MP told the Chair he was surprised his Opposition colleagues were in the House when they had been so resolute in boycotting the proceedings the day before.

The House ended on a sombre note when it expressed condolences to the victims of the United States invasion of Iraq. The House adjourned sine die on Thursday after sitting for 20 days.