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Noisy and dramatic time in Dewan debate on Budget 2004

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IT was a noisy week at the Dewan Rakyat which began debating the 2004 Budget.

There was plenty of heckling from Barisan Nasional and Opposition MPs over missed prayers, a Kelantan law on sodomy and other political issues unrelated to the Budget.

It started on Monday with newly-elected Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, who blew his chance of making any informed rebuttal on the Budget.

Instead of tackling the Supply Bill (2004) which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tabled the Friday before, Hadi charged the three-hour speech had caused Muslims to neglect their Asar prayers.

By convention, the Opposition leader is always first in debating the Budget after it is tabled.

"The Budget has no Islamic characteristics," was among the first things the Marang MP and Terengganu Menteri Besar said when he took the floor.

For several minutes Hadi, assisted by other Pas MPs, criticised Dr Mahathir's Budget speech on this point.

Barisan Nasional MPs held their horses until Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Noh Omar pointed out that Hadi could have left the House to perform his prayers if he wanted to.

Thus began a short round of finger-pointing and shouting between members from both sides of the divide on who did or did not leave the House for prayers during the Budget speech.

Hadi, declaring that he had taken leave to pray, then shouted, "Siapa yang tidak sembahyang, jangan jadikan calon! (Don't nominate those who didn't pray!)"

Perhaps Hadi was still recovering from the Pas muktamar (assembly) over the weekend, but nevertheless, BN MPs criticised him for being off-the-mark and unprepared.

But the prayer issue was not to fade away so soon. On Thursday, Datuk Hassan Mohd Ali (Pas-Parit Buntar) referred to it again.

It was a Chinese BN MP who tried to put Pas in its place. Lee Kah Choon (BN-Jelutong) asked if, since soldiers on duty were allowed to "postpone" their prayers to a more suitable time as they were protecting the country, could not a similar approach be applied to the tabling of the Budget speech which was a form of national duty?

MPs on both sides were also riled over Kelantan syariah which appeared to permit sodomy by a husband against his wife, a contention hotly denied by Husam Musa (Pas-Kubang Kerian).

He was referring to the Kelantan Syariah Criminal Code, enacted by the Pas State Government in 1993, which did not have a provision for punishment for sodomy by a man on his wife.

MPs began shouting as Noh stood up to lead the BN's criticism of the Pas enactment while Husam was reminded by the Chair to keep his speech within the time limit.

"Ok, you want to debate this? Let's take this up outside. Right after this, at three o'clock," Husam said to Noh.

Noh agreed and true to their words, both men were seated at the Parliament lobby's Press conference corner. A few MPs came out of the Dewan to observe the sparring.

"What we can't finish debating inside the Dewan, we can continue

outside," Husam quipped.

The two MPs traded mild insults during the 20-minute debate.

"Go back to law school," Husam poked at Noh, a trained lawyer.

"Your laws are not clear ...you don't know how to draft laws that everybody understands," Noh retorted.

In the end, the positions were thus:

Husam: Although punishment for sodomy by a husband against his wife is not covered under the State's Syariah Criminal Code 1993, it is dealt with under the Kelantan Enactment Number Two 1985 (takzir) which provided for a fine not exceeding RM5,000, or a jail sentence no longer than three years, or both, and six strokes of the rotan.

Noh: If that's the case, it's not stated clearly that this offence should be referred to under takzir. What's more, the 1985 enactment was put in place by the Barisan Nasional when the coalition ruled Kelantan, so Pas is admitting that the BN's laws are better.

"Thank you to Pas for agreeing to follow laws enacted by the BN. Why don't you tell the Kelantan Menteri Besar to throw away the 1993 enactment and just use the old one by BN?" Noh said.

For all the dramatics, there were good proposals made during the Budget debate, but controversies make the headlines.

The debate resumes on Monday.