

29/03/2003

Zam again proves to be the thorn

Ramlan Said

IF THERE is anyone the Opposition can regard as a thorn to its side, Deputy Information Minister Datuk Zainudin Maidin must fit the bill.

In the Dewan Rakyat, whenever Zainudin takes the floor, it always ends in a run-in with Opposition MPs, especially from Pas, who appear still sore over the screening of documentaries on Kelantan and Terengganu by Radio Televisyen Malaysia.

On Tuesday, once again Zainudin, or Zam as he is popularly known, locked horns with Pas members over his handling of RTM.

The row started when Dr Syed Azman Syed Ahmad Nawawi (Pas-Kuala Terengganu) accused the Terengganu Special Affairs Department, a unit under the ministry, of being an Umno propaganda machine as all its staff were either Umno activists or former assemblymen.

"I have a list of names here and these people are makan gaji buta (earning a salary without doing any work)," he thundered while waving a piece of paper.

Pas was unhappy that government machinery was being used to expose the party and its leaders, but Zainudin defended the action, arguing that RTM was just telling the truth like when it aired the Kelantan Dalam Gerhana segment.

Syed Azman said what Zainudin did was not that much different from Josef Goebbels, the German propaganda chief under Hitler.

The Kuala Terengganu member said since Zainudin joined the Information Ministry, RTM had lost its credibility and become a tool to smear the Opposition.

Smilingly, the Deputy Minister said he understood why the Opposition was so mad at him.

"I believe they are upset because RTM has succeeded in exposing their lies. You are known for using words which hurt feelings, like Goebbels, barua and Firaun.

"This is your trait. I am not upset with what you said ...it is your identity. RTM only confirms and proves the true colours of those people over there (Opposition bench). I did nothing but expose the truth about people who wear white skull caps but have no qualms using crude language and profanities. Is that wrong?"

Pas MPs were now up in arms with Mahfuz Omar (Pas-Pokok Sena), Abdul Fatah Harun (Pas-Rantau Panjang) and Dr Syed Azman demanding that Zainudin give way.

A quick thinking Deputy Speaker Datuk Lim Si Cheng doused the flames by ordering the Deputy Minister to move on with his reply.

Zainudin replied he was done and sat down, much to the chagrin of the Pas representatives who shouted takut ke, bagilah jalan (why are you running away? Give us way).

Besides Zainudin, another "perennial irritant" for the Opposition is Parliamentary Secretary in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Noh Omar.

The combative Noh, a lawyer by training, often riles the other side of the floor with his answers, which inevitably lead to shouting bouts.

One case in point was on Wednesday during the winding-up for his ministry when he explained that the scholarships of students studying in some Arab countries were withdrawn due to their anti-Government activities.

Pas MPs went ballistic when he remarked that if the students were no longer sponsored by the Government, they were free to continue with their anti-Government activities or even to urut janggut Nik Aziz (Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Pas spiritual leader and Kelantan Menteri Besar).

The House erupted in pandemonium with Pas members demanding Noh apologise and retract his remarks. Shouts of kurang ajar and minta maaf were heard.

Noh refused point blank, charging Pas was more kurang ajar with its leaders using profanities and foul language at ceramah.

Deputy Speaker Datuk Muhammad Abdullah was at his wits end trying to restore order. In the end, it was the clock - the time then was 5.30pm - which provided the solution.

Muhammad declared the House adjourned for the day, leaving the quarrelling MPs with no choice but to end their war of words.

However, the Opposition was not about to give up that easily in discrediting RTM, although the target was no longer Zainudin.

The "victim" was Culture, Arts, and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir who took the floor after Zainudin's winding-up.

Datuk Kamaruddin Jaffar (Pas-Tumpat) stood up for a clarification on domestic tourism, asking the minister that wasn't it strange that while his ministry was going all out promoting domestic tourism, another government agency - RTM - was running documentaries to discredit Kelantan and Terengganu.

"You say the ministry is working hard to promote tourism in all States but how is that possible with RTM airing documentaries like Kelantan Dalam Gerhana which can put tourists off?".

Caught by surprise with Kamaruddin's ploy to corner him, Kadir said "this is the last time I'm giving you way for clarifications", to shouts of disapproval from the Opposition bench.

The minister complained to the Chair that Opposition members like to kona (stray) from the topics on hand when given the floor.

"But as for RTM, I can say that it has played an important role in promoting tourism, in fact one of the best agencies," Kadir said to cheering from backbenchers.

The week started on a sombre note with the tabling of a special motion opposing the war in Iraq by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir, who is on two months' leave, "cancelled his leave for one day" as described by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, to move the motion which won unanimous support from all MPs, Barisan Nasional and Opposition alike.

The debate that followed saw members heaping scorn on the United States and its allies for launching the attack despite world-wide protests and the absence of any United Nations mandate.

Shah Alam MP and Backbenchers Club chairman Datuk Mohd Zin Mohamed's indignance perhaps summed up the feelings of all members.

He did not mince words in calling for President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair be hauled up before an international court of justice to face trial for crimes against humanity.