

Penang speaker wants a longer Q&A session

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By Susan Loone

New Penang legislative assembly speaker Law Choo Kiang is mulling a proposal to increase the verbal question and answer time in the sitting as part of the House's reform agenda.

In an interview with Malaysiakini, Law said that he plans to continue the proposed reforms which were part of the legacy left by former speaker Abdul Halim Hussain, who presided over the House from 2008 to April this year.

"According to our previous records, the state assembly standing order committee proposed eight amendments, and submitted them to the state executive council and legal advisor for consideration," Law said.

dap special meeting 110313 lim guan eng"One of the amendments is to increase the verbal Q&A session from three hours (on the first day of the sitting) to 90 minutes every day of the proceedings," he added.

However, the proposal had lapsed since it was proposed in the last term, before April 5, when Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng (left) dissolved the state assembly on Apr 5, two days after Parliament dissolved, paving the way for polls on May 5.

Law said the proposal must now be discussed again by the new committee, which was formed last Friday.

Law supports the idea to increase the time for Q&A session, adding that he was confident it would be carried out during his tenure.

"Let's us do whatever we can. We do not have to wait until every amendment is approved," he said.

The recent sitting from Jul 2-5 ended dramatically with Lim apologizing for no Q&A session, after which the opposition decried that democracy was dead in the Penang assembly.

Lim admitted it was a mistake to suspend the session, explaining that it had been decided earlier - on recommendation by the legal advisor - in the transition period before Law was appointed speaker on June 28, just one working day to the start of the proceedings.

Evaluate performances

To ensure that the 40 assemblypersons perform well in the state assembly sittings, Law invited the media to closely evaluate them, instead of leaving the task to the state government.

He added that in countries like Taiwan, this is being carried out by NGOs which publish their findings and observations.

Law proposed that a media agency or organisation set up a monitoring group to evaluate the performance of the elected representatives.

"This includes their attendance, quality of debate, and creativity in presenting their views, so that we can hold them accountable to the people and the House," he said.

"The media should play their role as the fourth estate, just as they evaluate the performances of players after a football match," he added.

"We can identify the best representative and the worst one, so that others can follow and learn," he quipped.

To facilitate this task, Law said he was willing to provide relevant statistics and data - such as attendance records and debate times - to help with the evaluation.

"I will also monitor their attendance, it is then up to the executive to monitor the attendance of government department heads or officers tasked to attend the sittings," he said.

Law agrees that all YBs - from both the political divide (BN and Pakatan Rakyat) - should enjoy the same treatment inside the assembly hall.

As a first step, Law said he had invited state opposition leader Jahara Hamid (right) to attend the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting in South Africa at the end of August.

He plans to also form a coordination mechanism, where party whips would be invited to attend regular meetings so that the state assembly sitting can run smoothly.

On what issues would be sanctioned or rejected during debate in the Dewan, Law said "anything as long as they are based on rational arguments and not simply

raised to hurl abuses at each other".

"The standing order sets the most basic demands and standards to regulate the House," he said.

"Unless the assemblypersons really cross the line, I would not purposely compel them to leave the House and deprive them of their right of expression," he added.

"I have a high level of tolerance," he claims, adding "If I could not bear it any more, I believe others would also feel the same".

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