

Don't fear the Iron Lady, ministers told
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Fauwaz Abdul Aziz

'Do not be afraid of Rafidah Aziz!'

This is the message that protestors conveyed to the cabinet as ministers deliberated on the US- Malaysia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the administrative capital of Putrajaya this morning.

The International Trade and Industry Ministry helmed by Rafidah - who is known as the 'Iron Lady of Malaysia' - has led the past five rounds of FTA talks with the US Trade Representative.

The protestors, who had gathered outside the prime minister's office, said ministers should not be intimidated into acquiescing to the trade agreement.

"Why is the cabinet so afraid of this woman? This woman who is acting for US interests?" asked former PAS leader Mahfuz Omar to shouts of approval from the more than 300 protestors.

Mahfuz is also the chair of the Kedah-based Institute of Community Integration and Development (Impak).

The protestors, comprising PAS members and supporters as well as representatives from grassroots groups, marched from the Putra Mosque to the premier's office some 500 m away.

The hour-long protest, which started at 9am, was carried out under the watchful eyes of some 20 police personnel.

The protestors carried placards and banners, which among others, said 'Don't trade away our lives' and 'Don't let US rule Malaysia'.

Just one minister

Meanwhile, PAS treasurer Dr Hatta Ramli told the protestors that Rafidah's 26 years in office should not intimidate her peers.

"She may be a senior minister, as senior as (works minister) S Samy Vellu and (energy, water and communications minister) Dr Lim Keng Yaik. But she is only one minister!" he said.

Earlier, Mahfuz and five other leaders met briefly with Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's senior private secretary Ahmad Yaakob to submit a memorandum on their concerns over the FTA.

During the closed-door meeting, Ahmad was said to have given an 'assurance' that matters had not yet been finalised as the ministers are still "studying the issues".

If this is the case, Marginalised People's Network (Jerit) co-ordinator D Letchimi Devi asked the protestors what Rafidah meant when she maintained that the cost-benefit analysis for the FTA had already been conducted?

"Are they (cabinet ministers) still willing to sell our dignity, to sell their own people, to the American capitalists?" she said.

The other speakers warned ministers that their names would go down in infamy if they agreed to an FTA with the US.

"The fate of 25 million people in this country cannot be gambled on an agreement which binds its future to the interests of a foreign nation," said Malay advocacy group Teras president Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid.

Malaysian farmers, activists and opposition parties have demanded a halt to negotiations on the FTA which they say will damage livelihoods.

They also claim provisions in the FTA would bind the government and restrict the space for it to make policy in the public interest due to the higher protection measures for investors proposed by the US.

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