

Dewan Rakyat: Shahrir calls for BBC chairman to be appointed

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HAS the time come for the Barisan Nasional Backbenchers Club chairman to be appointed and not elected by Members of Parliament?

Former club chairman Datuk Shahrir Samad certainly thinks so.

In what some might construe as a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that may further undermine the autonomy of BN MPs, he said that this might help avoid the kind of confusion in the House last Thursday.

Shahrir said the fact that the chairman's post was an elected one may have made MPs think that they could elect anyone to the position. It may also have encouraged them to think that they could re-elect him after he resigned from the post.

"Maybe it is time the BN leadership just appointed the chairman and not allowed members to elect the person," he told a Press conference.

Shahrir said everyone in the BN structure in the House was appointed, with the exception of the Backbenchers Club chairman and his deputy. He said the time had come to clear the air on the role of the Backbenchers Club chairman in the system.

On his two years as club chairman, he believed it had led to some change in the way issues were raised in Parliament and the quality of debate.

"There has been more openness in our members," said the MP, who has often been seen as a maverick for his strong and independent views on matters of public concern.

Shahrir said the openness of MPs also had an effect on public and non-governmental organisations, some of which had beaten a path to MP's doorsteps to lobby their case.

"I hope that in the last two years, I have brought them (BBC members) a long way with regard to their approach to debate and their performance in Parliament."

He urged the Government and the executive to continuously engage MPs and not sideline them from the system and the decision-making process.

On Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's directive that BN MPs adhere to the Whip at all times, Shahrir said: "I am not disappointed ... Life is like that."

The decision, he said, effectively left members doing a balancing act when they carried out their duties.

"On one hand, they have to look out for party interests and on the other, they have to look at the needs and interests of the people."

On his support for Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang's motion last Thursday, he said it may have been a mistake where parliamentary procedure was involved, but all right as far as the political model was concerned.

Shahrir said the large number of emails and SMSes sent to him could be an indicator on the correctness of his actions last week.

In another development, an extraordinary general meeting of the club scheduled yesterday to elect a new chairman was cancelled following a directive from Abdullah.

The directive, communicated to BBC secretary Datuk Rosli Mat Hassan by Deputy Prime Minister and BN Whip Datuk Seri Najib Razak, was for the club to maintain the status quo.

With this, the chairman's post will be left vacant, while deputy chairman Datuk Raja Ahmad Raja Omar becomes the acting chairman.

Only the chairman and his deputy are elected, with the rest of the committee being appointed.

Shahrir's exit as BN Backbenchers Club chairman came after he supported a motion by Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang to refer the New Straits Times to the Rights and Privileges Committee.

The report had implicated an unnamed MP who had asked Customs to "close one eye" to the import of sawn timber from Indonesia through Sungai Rambai port in Malacca.

Datuk Mohd Said Yusof (BN-Jasin) later admitted that he was the MP in question.