

# Najib cracks the whip

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by **Zainon Ahmad**

**BARISAN** Nasional (BN) backbenchers are like lovelorn wives, forever pining away for their lord, the ministers – like the faithful and chaste Sakuntala of the Indian love classic never once doubting that her philandering husband would eventually return to her.

When he did return, Sakuntala, who had forgiven him long ago, washed his feet as he stood on a tray and dried them with her long hair before he stepped into their house, where all the members of the household were excited as their mistress paid homage to her long absent lord or *suami*.

Thus, the excitement in the Dewan Rakyat on Monday was palpable. It was not that all the 33 members of the cabinet, suddenly realising that they were MPs and responsible to Parliament, were in the House during question time.

Only six were present. But that was enough to elicit a profusion of expressions of gratitude and fealty from the backbenchers. Most did not fail to utter "thanks for answering my question in person", after a minister had responded to a query and before proceeding to follow up on the answer.

On Tuesday, only two were present. None on Wednesday, cabinet day.

On Thursday, only five ministers were present during question time but exultant expressions of gratitude like "thank you for approving that community sport complex for my constituency" and "thank you for coming to my constituency recently" were heard.

The presence of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, who is also the government chief whip in the Dewan Rakyat, on Monday, even for a few minutes till the House moved into the next order of business of the day's sitting, was indeed an added bonus.

They must have hanged down their head in shame when later in the week he told them they must at all times be present in the House. One reason for the rebuke was the Dewan Rakyat was adjourned early a fortnight ago for lack of quorum – an embarrassment since the BN controls 91% of the seats in the Dewan Rakyat.

A further demonstration of their affection for their knights errant was the passionate defence they put up when attempts were made to malign or hurt them. Thus the flurry with which they rushed to defend Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein on Monday and Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting on Wednesday when attempts were made to cut their salaries by RM10.

The salary-cut motion by Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang against Hishammuddin also included his two deputies – Datuk Hon

and his ministry's parliamentary secretary, P. Komala Devi.

Kit Siang called for the four to be censured for "collective neglect and irresponsibility" because they had allegedly failed to provide for Chinese and Tamil primary schools to be built under the 2007 budget and the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

The backbenchers showed their disapproval noisily when Kit Siang brought in Hishammuddin's brandishing of the keris during the recent Umno assembly and, because of that, described him as "the most divisive and polarised education minister in the nation's history".

And when he called on Hishammuddin to resign as education minister, most of the Umno backbenchers were on their feet shouting "no way, no way".

On Wednesday, it was the turn of MCA MPs to come to the aid of their president. They were, of course, helped by other members of the BN component parties.

In his motion, Tan Kok Wai (DAP-Cheras) said Ong "*makan gaji buta*" (getting paid for doing nothing) for allowing the performance and integrity of the local government to deteriorate.

With BN dominating the Dewan Rakyat, the two motions were easily defeated. Kit Siang and his party colleague knew they had not a prayer but they went ahead not because they hoped to get some support from some BN MPs – they knew that was impossible after

what happened to Datuk Shahrir Samad (BN-Johor Baru), Datuk Mohamed Aziz (BN-Sri Gading) and Datuk Mokhtar Raden (BN-Kinabatangan) – but more because the debate provided them with opportunities to air some of the weaknesses and

shortcomings of the government.

But while the backbenchers often rebuke the ministers – while they were away, of course – for not being present to answer their questions, they themselves were not beyond reproach.

For instance, Women, Family and Community Development parliamentary secretary Datuk Paduka Chew Mei Fun came fully prepared to represent her minister to answer question Number One on Nov 8, only to discover that Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin (BN-Kinabatangan) was not in the House to ask the question.

And on Nov 16, the Dewan Rakyat passed the estimates for the Ministry of International Trade and Industry without debate because the backbenchers who were interested in trade and commerce were not in the House. The capable deputy minister, Datuk Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah, who was prepared for a long debate, was visibly disappointed as the MPs had gone off for early lunch.

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