

Restore Independence Of Parliament -- Academic

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By Kurniawati Kamarudin

KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama) -- The first meeting of the first session of the 14th Parliament next Monday is something Malaysians are eagerly awaiting as it also heralds the opening of a new chapter in the Dewan Rakyat.

The changeover at the federal government level - the first after six decades of rule by the Barisan Nasional - has Pakatan Harapan ruling the roost in the august House but whether or not its much-touted New Malaysia will be evident in the form of greater parliamentary independence remains to be seen.

The return of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed as Prime Minister and Member of Parliament (Langkawi) to the House of Representatives, as well as the presence of young and enthusiastic MPs like Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman, 25 (Muar) and P. Prabakaran, 22 (Batu), are bound to spice up the debates this time around.

All 222 MPs, including 121 representing Pakatan Harapan, will be sworn-in next Monday. Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Muhammad V will deliver his Royal address at 10 a.m. on Tuesday. The first meeting of the 14th Parliament will run for 20 days between July 16 and Aug 16.

RELEVANCE OF PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES ACT

As a symbol of this nation's democracy, Parliament is the foremost institution where the voices of the common people are heard and where laws are drafted, amended or repealed.

It also controls how the country's money is spent and oversees the executive branch of the

government.

However, for Parliament to remain independent and not beholden to the ruling political parties, it is vital for the present government to review its administrative system, said International Islamic University Malaysia law lecturer Dr Shamrahayu A. Aziz.

"For Parliament to be a truly independent, it has to be a self-governing body and shouldn't be regulated by any government department.

"Only by being fully independent can Parliament carry out its functions effectively as the symbol of democracy, " she told Bernama, recently, adding that funds should be allocated to the institution directly instead of through the Prime Minister's Department.

Suggesting that the repealed Parliamentary Services Act 1963 (PSA) be reintroduced, Shamrahayu said the Act empowered Parliament to oversee its administrative affairs and hire its own staff. The Act also guaranteed the MPs parliamentary privileges or freedom of speech.

The PSA was repealed on Nov 20, 1992. Since then, Parliament's administrative and financial affairs have been handled by government departments like the Public Service Department and Treasury.

The PSA had provided for the establishment of a separate "Parliamentary Service", the members of which were appointed by the Dewan Rakyat Speaker and Dewan Negara President. Under the Act, the number of staff, their designations and their salaries were determined by an advisory committee and approved by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

In 2015, 11 civil society organisations had banded together to push for parliamentary reforms, including the reintroduction of PSA.

Calling themselves "Gabungan Cadangan Penambahbaikkan Parlimen" (Collective

Suggestions for the Improvement of Parliament), the coalition had said that MPs must have the independence and power to manage their own parliamentary affairs so that they are effective and efficient in exercising oversight and supervision of the executive.

"The work of Parliament has to be that of Parliament, not the work of the executive. Parliament should not be under any government or ministry. The PSA must be restored in a first step towards making Parliament administratively and financially independent of the executive," the coalition had said in its framework for strengthening Parliament.

IMPROVE QUALITY OF DEBATES

Shamrahayu said there had been some discussions in 2005 to revive PSA but no follow-up action was taken after that.

"This could be due to the argument that the absence of the Act did not have any major impact on the MPs' freedom of expression," she said.

She, however, stressed that PSA was relevant for the establishment of a special committee that allowed Parliament to act as an inclusive forum that brought together government MPs and opposition lawmakers, as well as experts in various fields and members of the public, through more structured and effective public engagement.

Nevertheless, she added, any effort towards enhancing the independence and integrity of Parliament must involve the commitment of each and every parliamentarian.

Urging the newly-elected MPs to improve the quality of their debates during the Dewan Rakyat meetings, Shamrahayu said the public has high expectations of them as they were being seen as far-sighted lawmakers who would closely examine the government as it discharged its responsibilities to the people.

In other words, the MPs should not only act as political party representatives who only

highlighted the woes of their constituents but should also be the voice of the people as a whole.

Shamrahayu also hoped for full attendance at the Dewan Rakyat sittings.

"The MPs must make it a point to attend the sittings and all the seats (in the House) must be occupied. We understand some of them have busy schedules but they must realise that their presence in Parliament is important as per the trust placed on them by the people who elected them. They are the lawmakers and key members of the forum that scrutinises every inch of the nation's administrative journey, " she added.

Translated by Rema Nambiar BERNAMA

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