

DISCUSSION, discourse and debate – three words that seem to have far reaching implications on the state of affairs in Parliament.

Of late, these words have been used to spur the Members of Parliament (MPs) and, in the same breath, Umno members, towards promoting greater deliberation of issues affecting the country and the party.

It appears that with the return of Lim Kit Siang as the Opposition leader, the topic surrounding the debate, or rather the lack of it, on serious issues in Parliament has resurfaced.

After sitting for the first time this year in May, the Malaysian Parliament is now well into its second session, which is scheduled to end by mid-July. The new sitting saw the number of parliamentary seats increase to 219 from 193 seats last year, after a delineation exercise that resulted in 26 more seats.

To accommodate the new MPs, the sitting arrangement has been changed, while the premises have been renovated to include fully equipped rooms from where ministers can carry out their parliamentary duties.

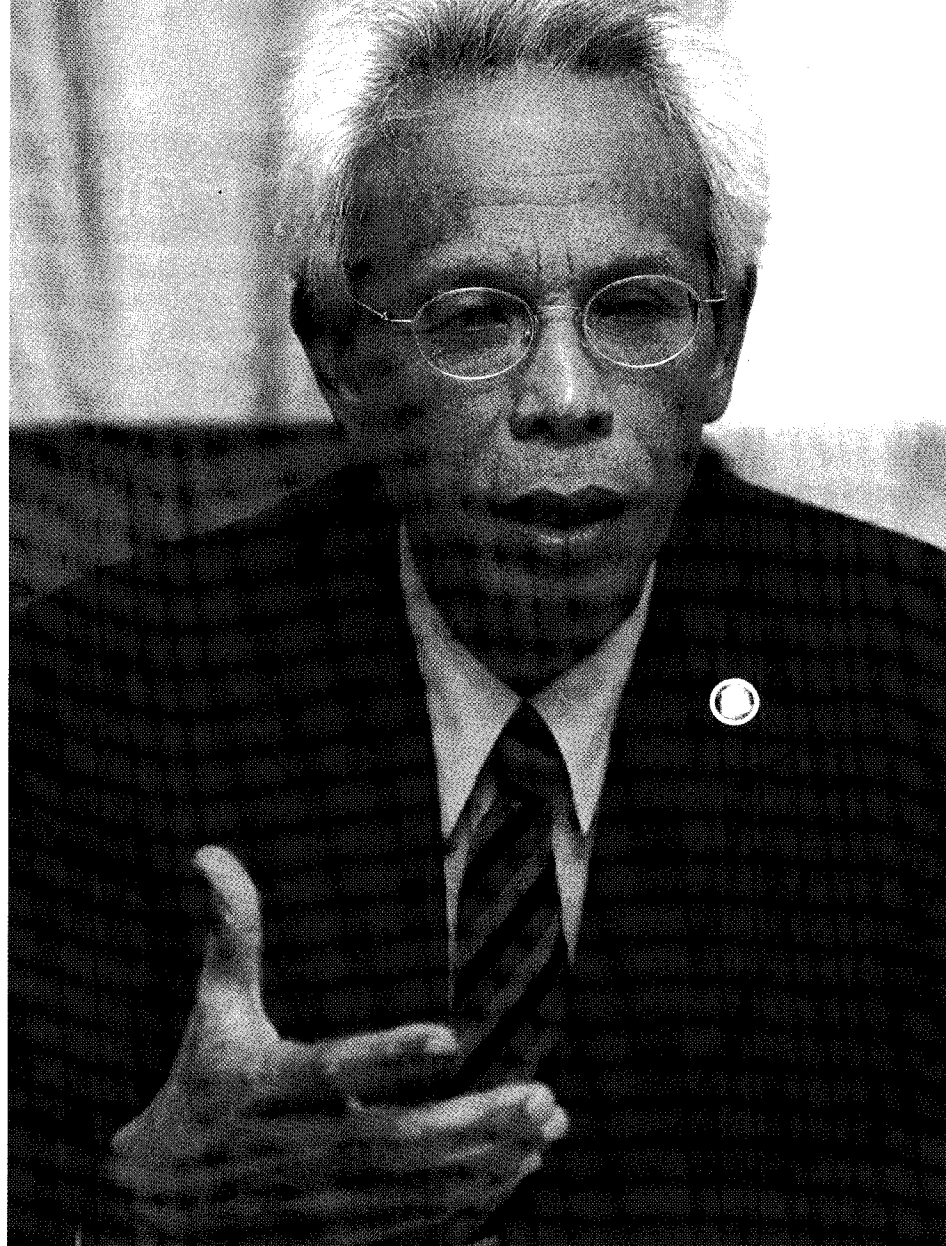
However, knowing well that numbers do not mean that issues get the attention they deserve, both sides of the political divide are not letting up on their efforts to improve their performance in the fish bowl.

Simply put, MPs are to represent the people. Besides being legislators, their role is to articulate views, hopes and aspirations of those who placed them there.

The question therefore is whether there is truth in the decade-long suggestion that MPs from the Barisan Nasional (BN) are not courageous enough to raise what is required of their position and to participate in 'quality' debates.

Dispelling this notion, veteran politician Datuk Shahrir Samad, chairman of the BN Backbenchers Club, stresses that there has been no lack of quality debates generally from before the last general election up to the present.

But, what is perhaps required is a change in the way MPs function. Shahrir proposes the formation of committees to support MPs to be more critical of issues confronting them both in Parliament and their daily activities.



Shahrir: We want to change the perception of Parliament being reactive to government-initiated legislations

Pepping Up Parliament

Is there truth in the widely held view that Barisan Nasional MPs do not stand up vocally enough in Parliament?

By Halim Wahab



Lim: Claims Parliament has failed to address critical matters affecting the people

'We want to change the perception of Parliament being reactive to government-initiated legislations by forming special committees to look into specific issues,' he says.

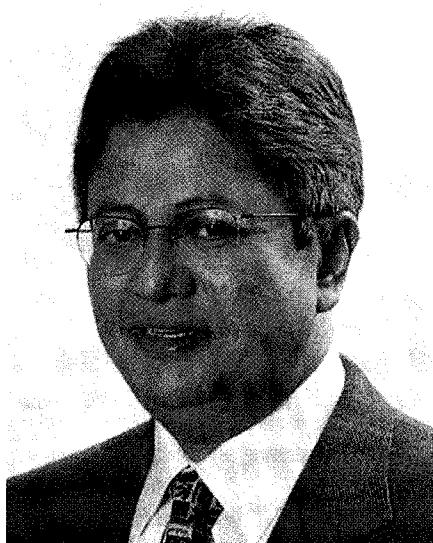
Backed by newly appointed MPs from different backgrounds and with higher academic qualifications, he is confident that the quality of discourse held within the august halls of the legislative arm of the nation will continue.

As a start, BN MPs have created a special committee to look into the issue of graduates and unemployment. To facilitate this, the committee will invite government officials and tap the input of non-governmental organisations and experts in the field to drive the focus group.

Shahrir considers this as opening up Parliament to the public. While this initiative appears to be a step in the right direction, the acid test would still be what takes place in Parliament when new legislations or amendments are debated.

'The issue of having a quality debate is a subjective one. One of the problems we face is that the media will judge us not on quality, but whether the debate is sensational and has news value. A quality opinion may not be newsworthy. You can have someone giving a good exposition on some subjects but only the more sensational part is highlighted,' he notes.

Nonetheless, how much the latest initiatives will counter concerns by the Opposition that these are dangerous times, with the BN having the biggest ever representation in Parliament, remains to be seen.



Zaid: Advocates the idea that top party positions need not be linked to government posts

But, Shahrir contends, 'The Opposition will always want Parliament to give them more influence than their numbers represent. So, if we do not agree with the Opposition, we do not have quality.'

According to Lim, who returns to Parliament after a five-year hiatus after he was defeated in the 1999 election, the august house has failed to address the critical matters affecting the people and the just rule of law over the past two decades, citing issues like the independence of the judiciary as an example.

He draws on the maxim that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely, saying it could prove to be true if BN MPs are not brave enough to raise what is fair, right and proper.

Lim also speaks of parliamentary reforms and modernisation undertaken by governments around the globe over the last few decades. Sadly, he feels, this trend is not catching on locally, claiming that whatever amendments made to the Parliamentary Standing Orders were not meant to expand the democratic space, but, limit it.

Adding to this is the lack of infrastructure support on building knowledge on the part of Opposition MPs. Lim has proposed that a Parliamentary Opposition leader be provided with adequate staff to carry out his duties – at least two political secretaries, one private secretary and three research assistants.

Incidentally, Shahrir echoes the sentiment that MPs cannot be allowed to be dependent on their instincts and knowledge as legislators.

Thus, BN MPs are now in the process of hiring research officers in various fields and disciplines to assist in enhancing their performance in Parliament. 'What we are doing has not been done before,' he adds.

Parallel to the issues facing Parliament are those facing Umno. First time MP Datuk Zaid Ibrahim said there is a need for Umno to undergo a transformation so that it is more democratic and transparent.

Certainly, it is not a secret that some party members feel Umno, as the ruling coalition party, 'needs to be transparent so that the government can be transparent as well'.

Towards this end, Zaid, who had declared his intention to contest one of the three party vice-president posts, is advocating the idea that top party positions need not be linked to government posts for the simple reason that there would be more discussions within the government on certain issues or policies.

'People say that I'm saying this because I'm not in the government. Not, at all. I have certain views I want to promote and talk about and it's better to be outside so that one is not constrained by limitations of being in government,' he adds.

Zaid thus opines that party members must discuss, discourse on and debate and if more take this path, the party will be healthier. But, the changes, according to him, have to come from the bottom, based on the realisation that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

He feels there are a lot of delicate issues which have to be talked about, such as education, integration and Malay unity. 'Let the suggestions come forward. Let the people talk about it,' he says.

So far, it is not clear how Umno members will react to this call for change. But, undeniably it has a direct correlation with the performance of Parliament one way or another, be it through greater and in-depth debates or by being critical of policies, given that the party constitutes 60% of the BN representation in the legislative arm.

As Shahrir aptly puts it, 'What is Parliament? After all, it is the legislation, it is bringing up issues, checking of the executive's decision and performance of government departments.'

Not surprisingly, this is what the electorate is looking for. **mb**