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Nazri: Women senators must vote for family law Bill

BY SUHAINI AZNAM

KUALA LUMPUR: Women senators who have been up in arms against the controversial family law Bill, which they say will lead to erosion of their rights, will have no choice but to vote for it.

All talk of breaking ranks to vote against the Bill dissipated after Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz spoke to them in small groups before talking to a group of 25 senators, including the 19 women.

Anxious to ensure that Barisan Nasional senators toe the line, he warned that he was invoking the Whip and ordered the 19 Barisan women senators to vote for the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) (Amendment) Bill 2005 when it comes up for debate today.

"They are free to debate and speak their mind, but when it comes to a vote, they have to follow," Nazri told a hastily called press conference.



BATTLE OF WILLS: Sisters In Islam executive director Zainah Anwar seen making a point with Nazri at the Parliament lobby Wednesday.

"The Bill must go through. No question about that," said Nazri, who is in charge of parliamentary affairs.

The Bill, which was passed in the Dewan Rakyat in September, escaped the scrutiny of MPs.

Women's groups said that the MPs had focussed on polygamy in their debate, and that the two days allocated was not sufficient to debate a Bill of such nature.

Despite the men making up two-thirds of the 65-member Dewan Negara, the women had hope to send it back to the Dewan Rakyat for review and re-introduction.

Several women senators had made themselves available to the press during the lunch hour but their solidarity was shaken when Nazri turned up to talk with them.

Nazri assured the visibly upset senators that all grievances aired would be looked into.

On Tuesday, another Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abdullah Mohd Zin, who is in charge of religious affairs, had briefed the senators at length on the Bill.

The women remained unconvinced and submitted what is understood



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to be a very diplomatically worded letter, requesting the Bill be withdrawn.

In a rare show of solidarity, the women senators had reached consensus across party lines. Three PAS women senators had also signed the letter to Abdullah, whose ministry had originated the Bill.

“This is not a battle between men and women. It is a family issue, it is for the good of everyone,” said Senator Datuk Dr Norraesah Mohamad.

“Even if we are going to vote (for the Bill) tomorrow (today), we will present our views, which I am pretty sure are going to be strong,” she said.

She has promised to deliver a debate “not of emotion but of facts, one that would incite thinking and be made in good faith”.


After that, “both the men and women will vote by conscience”, she told *The Star*.

“So even if a law is passed, with its defects, at least the voice of women is now seriously being taken into consideration. The fact that Nazri is here today (yesterday) is clear indication that he does take us seriously,” she added.

Also seen at the Parliament lobby was Sisters in Islam executive director Zainah Anwar who is leading the group to oppose the Bill.

**FIVE CONTROVERSIAL POINTS
IN THE ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW
(FEDERAL TERRITORIES) (AMENDMENT) BILL**

- 1) The right of a husband to claim a share of his existing wife's property upon his committing polygamy**
 - Husbands have an equal right to a wife's property; likewise she has a claim to joint property acquired during their marriage.
- 2) Making polygamy easier for men**
 - While a husband may be able to prove that his proposed marriage is necessary, he does not have to prove it to be just.
- 3) Forcing a wife to choose either maintenance OR division of joint property upon a husband's polygamous marriage**
 - Syariah law makes it mandatory for husbands to provide maintenance for a wife throughout their marriage. Islamic law entitles her to both.
- 4) Enhancing the husband's rights to divorce**
 - This gives an additional right to divorce for the husband, which used to be the prerogative of the wife; he may escape paying any form of compensation.
- 5) Allowing a husband to get a court order to stop his wife from disposing of her property**
 - The husband has no rights over his wife's property since she is not obliged to provide maintenance for him or their children. That is his responsibility.

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