



Permits controversy continues

Weathering a recent political storm, International Trade and Industry Minister **Datuk Paduka Rafidah Aziz** demonstrated the reasons why she is known as the "Iron Lady" of the cabinet for her no-nonsense tackling of multilateral trade negotiations or domestic political challenges.

On 4 October, she complied with a cabinet directive to be in Parliament "at the earliest possible date" to provide answers on

the issuance of 'approved permits', under a policy that regulates vehicle imports to protect the national car industry led by Proton Holdings.

Although the questions had been raised when she was on working visits to the United States and Laos, some opposition Members and Backbenchers had held her to account for the ministry's unsatisfactory replies and demanded her presence in the House.

The Minister fielded six questions within 45 minutes, pushing out previously reported statistics alongside clarification of the policy. It seemed to appease most, but disquiet and confusion has lingered in other quarters over additional points of contention.

In between, she had sharp words for the Leader of the Opposition **Mr. Lim Kit Siang** (Democratic Action Party -DAP) for enquiring, among other matters, if she and her family had benefited through connections with permit holders.

"Don't question my integrity. I am not willing to stand by and allow such malicious lies against my family and me. I'll sue you," she warned.

Datuk Paduka Rafidah was also criticized during debate on 27 September over her infrequent attendance in the House - a total of 19 days since 2000 and mainly during question time, based on parliamentary records. Mr Lim had likened this to royal visits, saying "she thinks, acts and believes that she is a queen when she sails into Parliament", and advised her to resign if she was not prepared to give up her style of "imperial ministership". But, having made it known that she was often abroad on official business, she retorted: "If I'm a queen, you are the court jester."

DISCLOSURE

The dispute over the approved permits has been swirling in an ever-widening spiral since June, even dragging in Members from the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (National Front - BN). It began with allegations by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad - now an adviser to Proton - that the national car industry was being

disadvantaged by an influx of imported second-hand luxury vehicles sold at unreasonably low prices.

Calls for the names of permit-holders were met with two successive lists revealing that four corporate personalities were the biggest beneficiaries in 2004 and 2005.

The ministry provided a written reply to Mr. Lim's request for the full list of permit hold-



Mr Lim Kit Siang.

ers, including individuals, since 1978. Attached to the reply was a list of individuals - including 337 current or former Senators and Members - who have received a permit since 2000.

The list, subsequently found to contain errors and the release of which was traced to a ministry officer's over-zealousness, caused much discomfort when it was publicized.

Senators and Members have been entitled since March 1997 to apply for one permit each during their term of office for personal use, but some saw the disclosure as the Minister's way of silencing critics.

Matters came to a head on 3 October, when a letter signed by the ministry's Secretary-General Datuk Sidek Hassan was sent to Members. Although it explained that the list had been mistakenly attached, those furious with the Minister were

MALAYSIA

MINISTER RESIGNS

Federal Territories Minister **Tan Sri Mohamed Isa Samad** has resigned from his cabinet post with effect from 15 October. The ministry oversees the three federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and the administrative capital, Putrajaya.

His decision was the outcome of failure to overturn a finding of guilt on five counts of "money politics" (vote-buying) while campaigning for a vice-president's post in the run-up to the United Malays Nationalist Organization (UMNO) polls in September 2004.

UMNO is the main party in the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (National Front) and the election of its office-bearers is watched with particular interest as it has a bearing on the larger political landscape. The party President and deputy traditionally become the Prime Minister and Deputy Premier, while the three Vice-Presidents are seen as likely successors.

After unexpectedly obtaining the highest number of votes among the Vice-Presidents, Tan Sri Mohamed Isa was called before the disciplinary board to respond to claims of inducement by some 20 witnesses.

A guilty finding was announced on 24 June together with a six-year suspension of his rights as a party member and loss of all party posts including that of division chief. He lodged an appeal on 6 July.

On 7 October, the supreme council upheld the decision but halved the suspension. In doing so, it took into account his service spanning 20 years and "good conduct" during the appeals process.

He remains a member but is barred from contesting the next two party elections, and will keep his position as MP.

The supreme council, at the same meeting, also halved the three-year suspension of Kota Baru division head Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, who had criticized the disciplinary board's decision to issue him a warning over alleged involvement in money politics.

Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Minister for Women, Family and Community Development, will serve as acting federal territories minister effective 17 October.

not placated.

Mr. Lim questioned Datuk Sidek's authority to write to Parliament and moved a motion to refer both him and the Minister to the Committee of Privileges. Backbenchers **Datuk Mohamed Aziz** and **Datuk Bung Moktar Radin** agreed.

As Deputy Speaker **Datuk Lim Si Cheng** ruled against the motion, the proceedings dissolved into noisy arguments from all corners. After a 15-minute adjournment to reinstate order, Deputy Speaker **Dato' Dr Yusof Yaacob** took the Chair and rejected the move as well.

The two Backbenchers later expressed regret and apologized, but their breach of party discipline was referred to the cabinet, which instructed BN Whip and Deputy Prime Minister **Dato' Sri Najib Abdul Razak** to issue each a warning letter.

Datuk Paduka Rafidah, meanwhile, went on leave for scheduled knee surgery. Asked soon afterwards in a press interview if she saw this as a period of crisis, she remarked: "It is part of the world of politics. In other words, if you are scared of waves, do not build your house by the sea. If you are scared of being told off, don't go into politics."

There was no closure even then. Speaking on a television talk-show on 14 October, Tun Dr Mahathir again questioned the basis of the Minister's decisions, producing documents in relation to specific cases in which he was adjudged to have played a role.

Five days later, the government released the delayed national automotive policy framework along with a new tax structure for vehicles. It also tweaked the approved permit policy sufficiently to remove contentious elements and to spread out its benefits. This effectively ended the argument.