

Malaysians have known for decades that the Dewan Negara is a rubber stamp of government policies passed by the Dewan Rakyat. Imagine our surprise when a small but brave group of Senators stood up against this practice and rightly questioned the folly of passing the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Bill 2005 on grounds that it contained explicitly discriminatory provisions against women.

Instead of commending them for raising these concerns and doing justice to women, the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi -- the same one which has professed that discrimination against women should not be tolerated -- lost not time in reining them back into the stables. The excuse given that passing the Bill is a matter of procedure, that we have to take one step back before going ten steps forward does not make sense to the thinking Malaysian who will surely be wondering why pass a flawed piece of legislation in the first place.

This entire episode does not augur well for women's human rights in this country. But even more worrying, it shows how far we have to traverse before becoming a truly democratic nation.

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