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Opposition may criticise Budget but it doesn't have better alternative

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TO the layman, the 2001 Budget can be clearly seen to focus on several areas.

Apart from measures to maintain and enhance economic development and businesses, the Budget proposed many measures to ensure a successful integration of the people into the Knowledge economy, or K-economy.

It aims to do this by pushing for the development and application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Parliamentary Opposition leader and Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor has questioned the term "K-economy". He was quoted in Parliament during the Budget debate asking if the term K-economy meant kroni-ekonomi.

He alleged that contracts for the construction of computer laboratories were given to government cronies.

Of course, Fadzil does not provide evidence but it still puts the Government in a spot.

Still, for the rakyat, the incentives offered will be helpful.

They will enjoy measures to give them easier accessibility to computers - either through income tax exemption for computers given by employers, computer loan facilities given every five years to civil servants, or withdrawal from the Employees' Provident Fund for purchase of computers.

Together with the construction of computer laboratories for schools nationwide, the emphasis on K-economy in the Budget is by no means tokenism.

It is meant to narrow the digital divide within society, which is ironically one of the clarion calls of the Opposition.

To be fair, some in the Opposition did have something positive to say about the Budget's emphasis on the K-economy.

DAP Member of Parliament Dr Tan Seng Giaw conceded that the Budget gave emphasis to technology development, "encouraging Malaysians to be more knowledgeable".

"We can see that a lot of emphasis has been given to that."

The 2001 Budget was one which also saw many perks for citizens, including tax incentives for the lower-income group, tax rebates, better access to increased housing and car loans, EPF withdrawal for the purchase of a second house, and healthcare incentives.

Some critics called such perks evidence of a "political Budget".

Gerakan president and Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said that the tax incentives for the lower-income group in the country could actually help stimulate the economy.

"There are about 1.2 million people earning RM3,000 or less in the country.

"By giving them an income tax exemption, they will either save or spend more. Either way, it stimulates the economy," he was quoted as saying.

Pas Youth chief and MP for Pokok Sena Mahfuz Omar, complained about the lack of a salary increase for civil servants in the Budget.

But as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad explained, this was because the salaries of civil servants had been increased by 10 per cent, which is cumulatively more than a one-month bonus.

"The Government gives out bonuses when it has the money. Now, tax is reduced and this means more people do not have to pay, which indirectly contributes to their income," Dr Mahathir was quoted as saying.

Perhaps, the only point in the Budget which the Opposition did not

attack was the increase in the sin tax for tobacco and liquor.

Malaysia's Opposition leaders and MPs have failed to deliver a meaningful criticism of the Budget.

They have even failed to deliver an alternative.

A popular local economist, who is affiliated with the Opposition, was quoted by an Internet newspaper as saying that the Barisan Alternatif would not be presenting a shadow Budget this year.

He said there was no point offering an alternative Budget as long as the Opposition continued to have inadequate access to Malaysia's "heavily biased media".

This argument is unacceptable for two reasons. First, the Opposition is able to air its views on the Internet.

Second, the popularity of its views on the Internet - a popularity supposedly fuelled by its often cited claims that the rakyat have lost their belief in the credibility of the mainstream media.

It is important to note that in a parliamentary democracy, resistance to Government policies and strategies is not unique. In fact, some argue that it is necessary.

But when the Opposition attempted to upstage the tabling of the Budget in Parliament last week, through a rowdy display of anger and protest, one would expect it to have something better to offer.

Perhaps its desperate attempts to drown out Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin's presentation was a last ditch effort to draw attention to its better ideas and proposals for the country's economy.

Unfortunately, this was not the case.

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