

Pakatan want seven panels on budget debate
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Pakatan Rakyat MPs today proposed that Parliament split the committee stage debate of the 2012 Budget into seven areas to provide a more efficient system to debate how the government spends the country's money.

PAS' Kuala Selangor MP Dzulkefly Ahmad (right) said currently there are no committees that focus on specific areas of the budget, leaving debates among the 222 MPs as pretty much free-for-all rushed through a limited time frame.

"In first world parliaments, there are actual committees specialising in particular ministries. These committees are made up of MPs from both the government and opposition.

"In Malaysia, there are no such committees. The entire Dewan Rakyat is the committee. This results in very ineffective debate and oversight," he said during a press conference.

DAP's Bukit Bendera MP Liew Chin Tong (left) explained that as it is, the national budget is normally tabled on a Friday, followed by up to 10 days of policy level debates. From there, the debates go into the committee stage where MPs debate the budgets allocated for each ministry over the course of 18 days.

He pointed out that the problem comes with the varied time set aside to debate each ministry's proposed spending, taking the example of the Prime Minister's Department which would get up to two days for debate while the Youth and Sports Ministry would only get two hours.

"In this case, we would see one or two billion ringgit simply get passed in a matter of two hours," he stressed.

Seven key areas

Under Pakatan's proposed system, Dzulkefly said the 25 ministries under Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's administration will be split into seven key areas of concern to allow more focussed attention by MPs on their selected areas.

The system will have between two and five ministries under each committee, with the aim of developing "specialists" among the MPs and facilitating "less partisan and more productive interaction, unlike in the full Dewan Rakyat where the government and opposition are expected to 'cross swords'," he added.

The proposed committees include:

1. National and International Affairs (Prime Minister's Department, Foreign Affairs Ministry, Information, Communication and Culture Ministry, Federal Territories and Urban Wellbeing Ministry)
2. Economics and Finance (Finance Ministry, International Trade and Industry Ministry, Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Ministry, Tourism Ministry)
3. Security (Defence Ministry, Home Affairs Ministry)
4. Education, Talent and Employment (Education Ministry, Higher Education Ministry, Human Resources Ministry)
5. Agriculture and Regional Development (Plantation Industries and Commodities Ministry, Agriculture and Agro-based Industries Ministry, Rural and Regional Development Ministry)
6. Infrastructure, Resource Management and Environment (Works Ministry, Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, Science, Technology and innovation Ministry, Energy, Green Technology and Water Ministry)
7. Community Wellbeing (Transport Ministry, Housing and Local Government Ministry, Health Ministry, Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, Youth and Sports Ministry)

Scrutinise budget 'line by line'

Liew stressed that it is important to revamp the way Parliament conducts itself during the annual budget debate, if MPs hope to effectively go through the entire budget in the little time allocated at the end of the year.

"Every year we have a budget, but we don't have the chance to question it line by line... that's what we want, to be able to question it line by line," he said.

PKR's Lembah Pantai MP Nurul Izzah Anwar noted that Parliament needs to be more pragmatic in the way it operates, especially since Malaysia is saddled with a 13-year budget deficit going into what is projected to be another global economic slowdown starting next year.

"All Malaysians should embrace this (pragmatism), including BN MPs, because this will affect the way money is distributed to their constituencies," she said.

Dzulkefly also urged the government to allocate each MP a monthly allowance of RM10,000 to hire research assistants, to make sure each and every MP is sufficiently prepared with facts and information to join the debate in whichever area they are in.