

Setting a price on civil service votes
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ANALYSIS A shade of ambiguity hangs over Pakatan Rakyat's 2012 shadow budget, as questions arise over the RM5.9 billion promise dangled in front of civil servants.

PKR de-facto leader Anwar Ibrahim detailed a salary overhaul to the tune of RM5.9 billion for the civil service when announcing the opposition coalition's shadow budget yesterday.

He explained that Pakatan would revamp the entire salary structure after bringing up the base wage level to RM1,100 - in tandem with their proposed immediate implementation of a RM1,100 minimum wage.

NONEAnwar (right) pointed out that this move would immediately benefit some 300,000 civil servants earning below the RM1,100 threshold.

This bottom income bracket, however, accounts for less than one quarter of the total workforce in the civil service, which is now hovering close to 1.3 million across the country.

Pakatan's pronouncement raises the issue of sustainability in the nation's finances, particularly since they've staunchly opposed the enlargement of an already bloated civil service.

But more pertinent is the true motivations behind taking such a populist stance on the civil service.

For years, the opposition had repeatedly slammed the BN for constantly expanding the civil service beyond what is needed, making it inefficient and untenable.

In 2007 - before the watershed 2008 general elections - they took a clear position demanding that the government take the "painful but very important step" of slashing the number of civil servants for leaner and more efficient operations.

Taking a leaf from BN?

This new stance of dumping billions of ringgit into the civil service spits back into Pakatan's own face as it looks and sounds similar to what the BN would consider doing to keep the civil service vote bank happy.

Which leads to another more specific facet to the issue - is a promise of RM5.9 billion in salary hikes based on financial considerations, or political mileage?

The civil service is widely perceived as a fixed deposit for the BN, with numerous allegations of overt, and some not so obvious, efforts to make sure civil servants cast their ballots for the ruling government.

With snap polls expected anytime now, a political party can't be blamed for wanting to entice support from such a large voting bloc.

Even Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is expected to throw in his own set of sweeteners, with speculation that he will either announce another round of bonus payments or an increase in the cost of living allowance next year.

But the question comes back to the core issue that Pakatan themselves have raised in the past - will the billions of ringgit in salary hikes improve the civil service?

Theory vs ground reality

In the full shadow budget paper, Pakatan explained that it "recognises" that political interference is a factor in the civil service's decline, accusing the BN of pushing political patronage over ability and professionalism.

While the paper stated that the civil service is "admittedly large" - instead of trimming, Pakatan has chosen to implement a "new regulatory environment" that will highlight "certainty, reduce distortions and ensure policy consistency in line with international best practices and standards".

Essentially, they want to push a new "tradition" focused on efficient and effective service, cutting down on red tape and regulatory hurdles, backed up by transparent compliance audits and "excruciating" penalties for violations.

But if what Pakatan says is true, then they would end up in a Catch-22 situation: no matter what system they adopt should they take over the federal government, they will still have to deal with the very same senior civil servants who they claim were propped up by the BN.

It is arguable how effective such salary incentives could be in enticing support for Pakatan, both in terms of votes and in supporting a new government.

However, even if they are successful in taking swathes of civil service votes from the BN, it would only mean that Pakatan has beaten the BN at their own game.

Which raises yet another question - is that what Malaysians are looking for?