

BR1M: 'I help you, you help me'
MalaysiaKini.com
March 8,2012

There has been repeated denials from BN leaders that the RM500 cash handout under the Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) scheme is not a bribe ahead of the general elections, but the facts clearly show otherwise.

BR1M is the brainchild of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, who announced the scheme in his Budget 2012 speech, arguing that the one-off cash handout would help the lower income group deal with inflation.

The government will spend RM2.6 billion for this one-off cash handouts for all Malaysian citizens with a household income of RM3,000 a month or less.

While the civil service should be the proper authorities to handle the scheme, it is clear that BN has heavily embedded itself in the entire process.

Throughout the country, BR1M application centres are adorned with BN logos and images of BN politicians. The same can be said of letters, banners and notices advertising BR1M.

Such materials are already making their rounds on the Internet, particularly through Facebook.

Some netizens have also alleged that letters sent by the Finance Ministry to BR1M applicants were attached with slips notifying them to collect cash vouchers from the service centre of BN elected representatives.

Moreover, instead of civil servants conducting the BR1M application process, BN leaders throughout the country were the ones receiving the application forms and handing out the cash.

BN leaders: Everyone benefits

For weeks, newspapers were awash with reports of BN leaders, from ministers to grassroots leaders, distributing application forms and helping them fill them up.

At times, applicants were herded into halls where BN representatives or its local coordinators - oftentimes potential candidates for the elections - gave out the cash.

When contacted for comments, BN leaders dismissed claims that BR1M was an abuse of taxpayer funds as a means for the ruling coalition to shore up support, particularly among the low-income or rural voters.

Kuala Kubu Baru state assemblyperson Wong Koon Mun said BR1M reached out to more urban folks compared to their rural counterparts, stressing that urban voters were the ones who cost BN its two-thirds majority in 2008.

He claimed that many village heads in his constituency who openly supports Pakatan Rakyat also applied for the aid and their applications were approved.

"If we are to appease our supporters, we will not give it to PAS and DAP supporters. We could have diverted their aid and given RM1,000 each to BN supporters," Wong, who is also the Selangor MCA secretary, told Malaysiakini.

Jeram state assemblyperson Amiruddin Setro argued that the extension of the application deadline for BR1M proved that the federal government wanted to ensure as many qualified people were able to apply for the funds and not just BN supporters.

"Najib's target is to do his best to cover all Malaysians who are qualified for the aid," he said.

Is Pakatan just as guilty?

Several BR1M recipients interviewed by Malaysiakini said that the RM500 handout will not change their political inclination.

One recipient, who wished to be known only as Lee and collected the RM500 in Kuala Lumpur on Jan 21, said his opposition towards BN would not change.

"We need a stronger opposition... We deserve the money. They have been collecting quit rent, assessment and toll from us, and those are our hard-earned money. We only take back very little - RM500," he said.

Another recipient, who wished to be known only as Onn, said BR1M was a direct result of a stronger opposition which pressured BN into paying more attention to the people's welfare.

Lee Wen Chao, a retired engineer, was of the view that the aid is a form of vote buying unless it is made an annual programme and not just being distributed during election season.

Pakatan politicians have argued that unlike Najib's BR1M, the opposition coalition has annual cash handout scheme.

Among others, the Penang state government gives out RM100 to eligible senior citizens, RM100 for each newborn. In Kelantan, the state government pays RM1,500 to the family of deceased senior citizens and provides cash aid to single mothers and disabled people.

In Selangor, the state government provides a free insurance scheme for each newborn, RM2,500 to the family of senior citizens upon death and a RM100 shopping voucher for eligible senior citizens.

Handouts competition?

Regardless of the intentions, political observers believe that such populist policies by BN and Pakatan are plain wrong.

For starters, it does not contribute to productivity nor is it good for economic development.

"Instead of giving the man a fish, the government should equip the people with skills that can ensure sustainability," said UKM associate professor Mohd Agus Yusoff.

Mohd Agus, who teaches political science, said the billions of ringgit spent on BR1M should be used for proper poverty eradication programmes.

Social activist and university lecturer Wong Chin Huat expressed concern that BN is not competing on ideas, but on handouts.

"This will create a culture where whoever pays more will get more votes," he said.

He said this will encourage a culture where governments will find themselves further in debt, bringing Malaysia closer to economic collapse in the same veins as Greece.