

LETTER | Transparency in Budget 2022 planning, a sign of better things to come

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The bad must make way for the good. And over the past week or so, I am extremely pleased to see how the landscape of Malaysian politics is shaping out to be.

No longer are we inundated with talk of politicians hopping from one side to the other. A new government is in place and its ministers are getting down to brass tacks in formulating ways to lift the country out of the pandemic and its resultant economic crises.

This, however, does not mean that we stop criticising ministers or politicians – after all, Malaysians excel at this, thanks to the quality of politicians that walk the corridors of power. However, credit must be given where it is due.

Most recently, netizens have been singing praises for Khairy Jamaluddin, the

newly minted Health Minister. Undoubtedly, he did inherit a mess from his predecessor who went on to assume his former portfolio, but KJ, as he is fondly known to the public, was quick to fix the damages and forge a more positive path ahead in terms of our healthcare.

However, as a small business owner, I cannot escape from constantly thinking about my own enterprise, which has suffered tremendously due to government lockdowns for the better part of the year. For many out there like me, life has been a struggle since MCO 1.0.

Thankfully, there are signs that the new administration is finally listening to the voices of the people and is seeking to boost small-time business owners like myself to pre-pandemic economic levels – and I mean that literally.

I was pleasantly surprised to hear Finance Minister Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz's invitation to the public to provide suggestions for Budget 2022 covering four aspects – improvement of government procurement, enhancing cash assistance programmes, a review of tax incentives and the much-awaited drafting of the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA).

Government finally listening to grassroots

Signs of the government finally listening to grassroots voices are now bearing fruit. I welcome MOF's recent calls for Development Financial Institutions (DFI) to support the rakyat – especially business owners – financially. This can take the form of loans, credit facilities and financial aid to support employee wages, which will enable businesses to get back on track after suffering from a pandemic-induced slump.

I see this as a positive sign that the minister – and by extension, the government – are now truly placing the rakyat above politics by actively including public participation in the decision-making process.

This shift was also marked by the announcement of the Pre-Budget Statement (PBS) for Budget 2022, which provided a preliminary overview of the direction, approach, and expected benefits of the budget. The PBS also allows the rakyat to keep track of important metrics such as economic outlook, tax revenue performance status and public expenditure status as a more direct method of keeping the government in check.

To be honest, I didn't think politicians in this country – especially in the sitting government – had it in them to put themselves up to such a level of public scrutiny. I believe that the collective experience of all Malaysians with the government over the past 20 months has been a negative one. But initiatives

such as these will go a long way to repair public distrust over the executive branch and inspire confidence in the administration.

I, for one, have my suggestions ready to go. Among others, it includes continued assistance for struggling SMEs, long-term reskilling efforts to help SMEs digitalise, tax incentives for SMEs as well as special privileges for local businesses in government procurement.

Of course, my recommendations are skewed in favour of my line of work. But herein lies the beauty in such a strategy – if every business owner from every sector of the economy produces their own wish-list, it will only help the government understand our needs better. This will also result in more cohesive, responsive and efficient policies which will then benefit us in the long run.

To be fair, it did not take rocket science for us to finally reach this level. All we needed was political courage and capital. However, having been through hell and back for the past 20 months, I am glad we are finally at a better place now.

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