

Charm offensive on subsidy cuts, KLCC-style
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The government has launched a campaign ahead of impending subsidy cuts, in an apparent move to persuade the public to accept the unpopular move.

NONETs Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu) has engaged an events management company to hand out survey forms at KLCC since Saturday, in what is seen as a move to warm up the public to the idea of major subsidy slashes.

The 'Have Your Say' survey, similar to an online survey on the think tank's website, is being done in conjunction with the Subsidy Rationalisation Lab Open Day on Thursday at the KL Convention Centre, which is open to the public.

Respondents are asked three questions:

- * Do they agree to reduction of subsidies?
- * Do they agree that the savings could be used 'more efficiently and productively' on pro-rakyat projects?
- * Should the subsidy cuts be done in one, three or five years?

The promotional literature at the booth, as with the information on Pemandu's website, stresses that the government had spent RM74 billion on subsidies last year alone and that the economy cannot sustain such a large burden.

NONEThe website also insists that government subsidies must be reviewed and rationalised, 'in order to develop a more targeted plan so that they benefit the right demographics such as the poor and the vulnerable and not burden the future generation of Malaysians'.

Pemandu's communications director Alex Iskandar stressed, however, that this in no way implies that the government is going to implement subsidy cuts soon.

He denied media reports claiming that Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and Pemandu chief executive Idris Jala will present 'comprehensive reforms' on the subsidy structure at tomorrow's cabinet meeting.

"Everything will be presented to the public first on Thursday. Whatever we have now is not definitive," he said.

"We need to first get feedback from the public, get their opinions and figure out the shortcomings, and then we will present it to the prime minister... everything will be transparent."

However, a timeline to present the findings to Najib has yet to be set.

Last week, Reuters reported that the cabinet will make a decision tomorrow on slashing subsidies in its bid to cut what is considered the country's biggest budget deficit in 20 years.

Pushing only the positives

But the campaign, both at the booth and on the website, makes no mention of concrete measures to tackle corruption and mismanagement, two key issues that government detractors blame for the leakages.

NONEAlex said the campaign is merely an effort to get as many people as possible to attend Thursday's open day.

"We are just trying to gauge to what degree the public is familiar with the subsidies. We need to get as many people to come (as possible) so that we can present the entire situation to them. People should only make an informed decision," he said.

Alex added that there will be a discussion on the subject, with nine panellists comprising politicians in government and in the opposition, as well as heads of industry.

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