

Anwar calls for a fresh budget
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Beh Lih Yi

Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim today called upon newly-minted Finance Minister Najib Abdul Razak to table a new budget in the wake of the ongoing global financial crisis.

The PKR supremo said members of parliament cannot debate an "outdated budget" which was presented more than a month ago.

The budget was presented on Aug 29 by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was also the finance minister then. The portfolio was then handed over to his deputy on Sept 17. Last week, Abdullah also said that he would be stepping down next March to allow Najib to take over as prime minister.

Anwar's budget speech today was his first as opposition leader. He was also a finance minister before his sacking from the government in 1998.

Debate on history or budget?

Debating on the budget this morning, Anwar questioned at the beginning of his speech if MPs should continue with the debate since the statistics cited in the budget had become "unrealistic" as a result of the latest global economic situation. Citing the example of the fiscal deficit estimated at 4.8 percent for this year, he said the figure would balloon higher with the worldwide economic woes.

"If (Najib) is a real finance minister who is concerned (on the current situation), he should table a new budget," said the Permatang Pauh MP.

"Are we going to debate on history or budget?" he questioned further, adding that at least a revised budget should be tabled if not a fresh budget.

He also criticised Najib for allegedly being more preoccupied with approving projects worth billions of ringgit without tender instead of concentrating on efforts to tackle the economic situation in the country.

Among the projects, he claimed, were the RM11.3 billion high-speed broadband project, the controversial Maybank-PT Bank Internasional Indonesia (BII) deal and the purchase of 12 helicopters worth RM1.5 billion from Eurocopter.

Anwar then sought Deputy Speaker Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaffar's advice whether he should continue with the debate or adjourn the proceedings pending a new budget to be tabled.

However, the deputy speaker asked Anwar to continue and advised the latter that he (Anwar) could read out the opposition's alternative budget in the House if he wished to do so.

"Thanks for your confidence in us. We will table a new budget hopefully in a very short time (when Pakatan Rakyat takes over)," quipped the opposition leader.

During his speech, Anwar did not outline any specific budget measures from the opposition alliance which he leads.

'Not even a single ghost is here!'

Pushing for a new budget to be tabled, Lim Kit Siang (DAP-Ipoh Timor) joined in the fray by citing the parliamentary standing orders to ask the current debate on the budget to be adjourned until the new budget is presented to the House.

The veteran politician also lambasted the conspicuous absence of any government leader from the finance ministry in the House to explain why a fresh budget should not be tabled.

"Why the total silence from the frontbench? Not even a single ghost is here!" said Lim in his trademark fiery tone, adding that should Parliament continue with the debate, it would be a laughing stock in the eyes of the world.

It is learnt that Najib was present in the Parliament building this morning but did not come into the Chambers. Second Finance Minister Nor Mohamed Yakcop meanwhile left the Chambers after answering a question during the oral question session earlier.

Nevertheless, the call for the proceedings to be adjourned was overruled by the deputy speaker. The debate continued in the afternoon with Anwar's speech.

anwar ibrahim parliament pc on budget and najib 131008 03At a press conference at the Parliament lobby later, Anwar was asked to comment on premier Abdullah's statement today that the country had not slipped into recession yet and could weather the global economic storm.

"My concern is that they are still in a state of denial," the opposition leader told reporters.

To another question, he said he "saw no reason why any responsible MP could support such as irresponsible budget."

Pressed on the question of whether he would table a no-confidence motion against Abdullah, Anwar answered: "For now, our focus is on the economy."

Eight days have been allocated for the MPs to debate on the budget, to be followed by the reply from each ministry on points raised by the parliamentarians.