

Protest demo against GST put off
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The Protes coalition of activist groups and opposition parties against the Goods and Services Tax (GST) bill announced today that the demonstration planned for tomorrow at Parliament has been cancelled.

Protes said this follows Second Finance Minister Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah's announcement that the bill, scheduled for debate when Parliament reconvenes tomorrow, has been postponed to enable the government to get more public feedback on the contentious tax.

The coalition yesterday declared a preliminary victory over Husni's announcement, describing it as a vindication of the coalition's public campaign against the GST, which they said would burden lower-income earners.

Repeating it this morning at a press conference at PAS' headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Hatta Ramli (*second from left*) - who is Protes chairperson - said: "They (the government) wanted the bill to be read a second time, but we protested and we succeeded."

"They couldn't table it (for second reading). They lost and have admitted (their defeat), and we accept," added Hatta, who is also PAS treasurer-general and Kuala Krai MP.

"We have to be reasonable as we have to take into consideration the changed circumstances. We will always be monitoring the developments in this country. We are prepared and have taken the position of 'wait and see'," Hatta said further.

Protes will not stop

Hatta also apologised to those who had made preparations to participate in Monday's demonstration, including those who had already chartered buses and applied for leave from their employers to participate in the gathering.

He hoped, however, that the episode had not weakened the spirit of the people against the GST, and stressed that Protes' efforts to campaign against the GST in the form of roadshows and other events would continue.

"If the government plays around with the matter of this GST, I am sure this will anger the people, and many more will participate (in any future demonstrations).

"If they insist on tabling it (the GST bill), we will respond (at a scale) many times bigger (than the gathering planned for Monday)," said Hatta.

He claimed the coalition received word that "two to three times" the earlier estimated number of activists and supporters had planned to gather at Parliament tomorrow.

Event organisers had earlier declared about 2,000 Protes activists and supporters were to participate in the event, notwithstanding a warning by Kuala Lumpur police chief Muhammad Sabtu Othman against the demonstrators.

It was reported yesterday that Husni said the GST "will not be tabled for second reading in the March/April session (of Parliament) because we need more time to engage with the public."

The bill was first tabled in Parliament last December.

On when the bill would be tabled, Husni said: "It will depend on our engagement with the public and how the rakyat perceives the implementation of GST. So, we do not want to put a time-frame on that."

Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) secretary-general, S Arutchelvan (*left*), meanwhile, expressed disappointment that the government had not gotten public feedback on the GST before the bill was tabled in the last parliamentary session.

"They tabled it for first reading before getting feedback from the people," said Arutchelvan, who is also Kajang municipal councillor.

Also at the press conference were Y Kohila of the grassroots Network of Oppressed Peoples (Jerit) movement, PAS Youth secretary Kamaruzaman Mohamed and PAS Muslimat secretary Aiman Atirah Al-Jundi.

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