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How the manifestos measure up

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UNIVERSITI Kebangsaan Malaysia's Professor Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin sums up the party manifestos for the March 8 general election in one-liners:

The Barisan Nasional's would be: "I have given you so much." Pas' would be: "I am willing to give you, too." Parti Keadilan Rakyat's (PKR) would be: "I will give you whatever you want." And DAP's would be: "I will give everyone what they deserve," quips the founder-director of UKM's Institute of Ethnic Studies.

A common theme in all the manifestos launched this week is inflation and the cost of living.

The BN reports that it maintained price controls on essential goods and spent RM43.4 billion on subsidies last year, and it promises to continue to cushion the effect of rising prices.

PKR even pledges to lower petrol prices. But experts are concerned that neither maintaining the current price nor reducing it is sustainable.

"The price of oil will go up further and this will put pressure on the government," warns economist Wan Suhaimi Saidi.

The BN manifesto pledges to continue narrowing the gap by eradicating hardcore poverty by 2010, providing more jobs



and improving services to low-income households.

The opposition parties also come up with different schemes for a better standard of living.

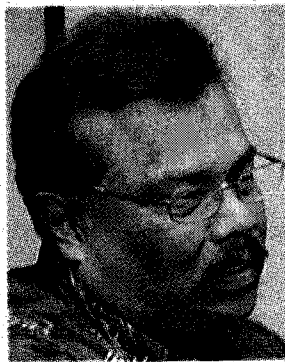
But experts describe most of their proposals as handing out fish, compared with the BN's stress on enabling people to fish.

"What the opposition proposals lack is the long-term, bigger picture such as education and improved training for the unemployed," notes Wan Suhaimi.

"You have to teach people to earn rather than relying on the government."

"The opposition manifestos do not have an economic programme for the country," says Universiti Utara Malaysia's Professor Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak.

"They promise goodies but they do not have a concrete

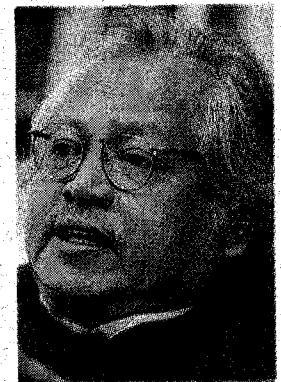


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economic blueprint to show how revenue would be created and how it would be spent."

The RM6,000 bonus which DAP offers to households earning RM6,000 or less per annum is "far-fetched and difficult to deliver", says Datuk Dr Wazir Jahan Karim, executive director of the Academy of Socio-Economic Research. "You have to build up capacity to be more productive with training and enabling them to enter better schools."

Pas' "nation of care and opportunity" is very attractive, she adds, "But is it just hand-outs? Or empowering people to get jobs which can be used as building blocks? Welfare should be linked to life-long learning."

Pas is taking the literal "za-

kat approach" to welfare, says UKM's Shamsul. A more complex model similar to the Scandinavian countries would involve a minimum wage, higher earners paying more tax, free healthcare and education.

"We should work for that kind of model, although it requires a complex bureaucracy and means testing," he suggests.

"Pas can't deliver that. Kelantan doesn't have it. After 18 years, they should have shown us what they achieved in Kelantan and then adopted that for the national level. Their welfare state concept is totally untested."

PKR has promised a minimum wage of RM1,500, notes Bank Islam's senior economist

Azrul Azwar. He's in favour, arguing that it would raise Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita.

"We are about three to five times behind Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea in GDP," he notes. A minimum wage would encourage Malaysians to work, reduce the country's dependence on foreign workers and help to reverse the brain-drain, he predicts.

"There is a downside: an increased cost of doing business. It is a question of choice in public policy. Do we move ahead on gross domestic product per capita or continue offering cheap labour?"

The experts also note that much of what the opposition is offering is already provided by the BN.

For example, Pas, PKR and DAP offer more access to health services for the poor. But 60 per cent of total expenditure on health already comes from the government, with the BN opening 14 new hospitals, 22 new Klinik Kesihatan and 64 new Klinik Desa since 2004.

As for UKM's Shamsul, he has one over-arching wish for the BN manifesto.

The "regardless of race" rider on provision of undergraduate scholarships for poor but deserving students should be applied for everything in the manifesto, he urges.

"That's the key to peace and security, so that all Malaysians feel they are stakeholders."