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## Dr Mahathir's opposition to BR1M is 'to further his political agenda'

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**L**ET'S keep politics out of the Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M) programme, which is targeted at alleviating the hardship of the poor, comprising nearly 60 per cent of Malaysians.

Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has opposed BR1M since its inception in 2012, had renewed his opposition on Sunday, calling it a form of corruption, even as the staggered payment starts on Jan 28 followed by payments on April 28, June 23 and Sept 28.

Ask the poor and they will tell you: "Why is the old man spoiling our *rezeki*? Of course, he does not need it, but we do."

Barisan Nasional leaders criticised Dr Mahathir for his opposition to BR1M, saying he was lashing out at anything that the BN government did.

"He is full of spite and wants to promote his own agenda. Pakatan Harapan politicians are finding it difficult to defend Dr Mahathir," one BN leader said.

BR1M simply is a form of social engineering, and widely employed by many countries the world over to help citizens make ends meet, cope with rampant capitalism and mitigate the downside of unequal development.

As recent as last month, Thailand approved about Rm1.8 billion in direct cash assistance to its poor. So did Singapore, Egypt and India and Sri Lanka.

Incidentally, Egypt distributes free bread to its people to battle the rising cost of living. They all assist their poor and have come up with eye-catching terms to describe it.

We call it Bantuan Rakyat Malaysia, or BR1M. Nearly every nation in the world has cash or non-cash assistance.

Even the DAP-led government in Penang, which to my memory, was the first to propose cash assistance to the poor before the BN government adopted the measure seriously.

Its effectiveness in Malaysia, first introduced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, is undeniable.

Dr Mahathir, who is now in the opposition camp, claims that BR1M is illegal and, therefore, a crime from the point of law.

"His opposition to BR1M has put Pakatan Harapan on the defensive... clearly, the people who need it welcome it, but Dr Mahathir is against the handout," said a political analyst.

"Pakatan Harapan leaders are treading a fine line here, between supporting Dr Mahathir and opposing or supporting BR1M because the

people want it," he said, adding that BR1M was a clear case of Dr Mahathir setting policy for Pakatan Harapan.

"As politicians, they know it is bad policy to oppose BR1M. Dr Mahathir knows that BR1M makes political capital for BN and he realises that he must destroy it to further his political agenda.

"The fact that BN gains political mileage from BR1M is incidental. It is a by-product of a good government policy. But Pakatan Harapan leaders have their own take on BR1M and it is clearly different from Dr Mahathir's."

Opposition leader Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail has countered Dr Mahathir, saying BR1M is not a bribe at all.

"It's not bribery. If people are qualified to get help from the government, they should be given it," said Wan Azizah, who is PKR president.

But she resorted to tying BR1M payments to the Goods and Services

Tax, saying everyone who consumes pays the tax, but not everyone receives BR1M. Of course, that is true. What is left unsaid is that BR1M is to help the poor cope with rising cost of living.

It gives cash to needy people to ease their spending needs and is highly recommended by international organisations as among efforts to rebalance the economy. The money spent also stimulates the economy, they say.

A recent study, conducted by David Evans of the World Bank and Anna Popova of Stanford University, bears out the benefits of cash handouts by governments.

The study found that most people used the handouts to invest in their children's education. Families receiving the handouts don't waste the money on booze and cigarettes, as was thought earlier. But, instead, that money is used for the benefit of their families. And that's money well spent.