

Bill to be debated on Monday

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Sitting extended to allow more deliberation on Bill to raise Covid-19 fines

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KUALA LUMPUR: The debate in the Dewan Rakyat on a contentious Bill to raise the fines for breaching Covid-19 rules has been deferred to Monday.

It came about following an uproar over the proposed increase in fines on such offenders, which critics deemed as excessive penalties.

The Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Bill seeks to impose a maximum fine of RM500,000 on companies for compoundable offences if they break Covid-19 standard operating procedure.

At present, health authorities are only empowered to impose a fine of RM1,000 against companies and individuals who flout Covid-19 SOP.

Yesterday, Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tan Sri Azhar Azizan Harun announced that the debate would be held on Monday, instead of yesterday as initially scheduled, following a request by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob.

"The Prime Minister, as the leader of the House, has requested the Dewan Rakyat for an additional day to debate on the Bill," he said.

He noted that such a move to change the dates of the sitting was allowed for under the Dewan Rakyat's Standing Order 11(2).

The Bill to amend the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 (Act 342) was to have been debated and voted on yesterday,

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Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim

which was supposed to have been the last day of the Dewan Rakyat's 32-day meeting before adjourning for the year.

Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin then stood up to request that the second and third reading of the Bill be deferred to Monday.

Several Opposition MPs were unhappy with the postponement, saying it was an abrupt decision.

Datuk Mahfuz Omar (PH-Pokok Sena) said the move was unfair as he had already made plans to visit his constituency.

"What's wrong if we table the amendments in next year's session?" he asked.

RSN Rayer (PH-Jelutong) also said he had plans to meet his constituents since the Dewan Rakyat was supposed to have adjourned yesterday.

"Instead of deferring the Bill, I suggest that it be withdrawn altogether," he said.

However, Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim stood up to quell the discontent within the

Opposition bench, saying that the deferment was not a unilateral decision by the government.

"There were discussions the entire morning and afternoon on the matter and also engagement with the Health Ministry and Health director-general (Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah).

"The matter was also discussed among opposition leaders before it was referred to the Prime Minister as there is a need to defer the reading of the Bill to allow space for all parties to discuss it further," he said.

Anwar said the Opposition was concerned with the proposed hefty compounds and jail terms proposed under the Bill.

He said the Bill would be referred to the Parliament's Select Committee on Monday morning to allow for more deliberation on the matter.

"If there is consensus by all on the crucial matters, then we could consider supporting the amendments.

"But if there is no agreement on several substantive matters, we will still have room to oppose and reject

the Bill," he said.

When the Bill was tabled for first reading on Tuesday, opposition MPs voiced their objection to what they deemed were excessive fines and prison terms imposed on companies and individuals who break Covid-19 SOP.

On Wednesday, the Health Ministry proposed lowering the proposed penalties by half in the wake of the outcry.

The Bill initially outlined a maximum RM100,000 fine or seven years' jail for individuals who breach Covid-19 regulations.

This has been reduced to RM50,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years.

If the offender is an organisation or company, the proposed fine of RM1mil has been lowered to RM500,000.

Earlier yesterday, Khairy said the amendments were needed to manage the pandemic as there is a possibility of another wave of infections in the coming months.

There has been a controversy of late over such fines, with critics pointing out that a private pool party in Kuala Lumpur on Dec 5 led to compounds of about RM1.5mil, while the organiser of a Dec 9 government function, which was attended by huge crowds, was fined RM1,000.

Khairy had previously explained that following the revocation of the Emergency Ordinances from Dec 8, the maximum compound that could be issued, unless an amendment is made to the law, is RM1,000.