

Anwar throws down debate gauntlet to Najib again

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By Melissa Chi

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 17 — Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim challenged today Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak to publicly debate the merits of both the government's Budget 2012 and Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) shadow plan.

"I want to reiterate the need for ... an open debate so that Datuk Seri Najib can go beyond making wild statements; it is better to face each other, so Malaysians can judge.

"He can present his views, I have no problem if he wants a little bit more time, but give us the opportunity to present Pakatan Rakyat's budget and Buku Jingga," Anwar told reporters at the Parliament lobby.

Najib yesterday called PR's shadow Budget a "right-wing Republican" budget that failed to address the needs of the people.

The prime minister said the shadow Budget, unveiled three days before his own Budget 2012, only focused on Malaysia's budget gap and national debt but made no mention of public welfare.

He also took a jab at what he said was PR's inconsistency in deriding the Budget as unrealistic while claiming BN had plagiarised policy proposals from its Buku Jingga manifesto.

"We have brought up the issue of minimum wage, salaries of civil servants and teachers, also stressed and the concession including IPP, privatisation like Bernas, also stressed to reducing the people's burdens. All these were not mentioned by Najib," Anwar said today.

In the Budget 2012 announcement on October 7, Najib pledged RM2 billion in wage hikes for the civil service and RM2.5 billion in direct aid for poor households and students struggling to meet the rising cost of living.

He also projected the country's gross domestic product (GDP) to expand by five to six per cent next year, with the fiscal deficit shrinking to 4.7 per cent from an estimated 5.4 per cent this year as Putrajaya cuts down on development spending.

But both analysts and opposition leaders have criticised the growth projections as being too high, and expect the national economy to expand by a little over four per cent at the most.

In its budget, PR believes it can cap government expenditure at RM220 billion and boost earnings by nine per cent to RM181 billion without new taxes, resulting in a 4.4 per cent deficit.

The alternative budget expects to raise RM15.5 billion through auctions of approved permits (APs), higher oil prices and by reintroducing import tax on 200 luxury items that was lifted by Barisan Nasional (BN) last year.

PR has also proposed Putrajaya set aside RM22 billion for subsidies and another RM5.9 billion to raise the wages of 1.3 million civil servants, citing rising cost of living.

"The issue of minimum wages, better living conditions, issue of housing, and also to rid the country from cronyism and enriching family members, if you can stop that and then corruption, then you can substantially reduce cost and the burden of the people," said Anwar as he repeated his debate challenge.

The Permatang Pauh MP said it was only right that Najib, as finance minister, stand up to defend the government's Budget 2012.

"He is the finance minister and he has been giving all these criticisms, rebuttals and critiques of the Budget, if he can do it through the government-controlled media and BN, why can't he do it as a responsible minister of finance and engage in a proper debate?"

This is the second time this year Anwar has challenged Najib to a debate. The first was when Buku Jingga was first unveiled in January.

Najib had not refused outright the challenge to debate then, but questioned the point of such an exercise.

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