

BN MPs want more funds ahead of polls
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KUALA LUMPUR, July 28 — Barisan Nasional (BN) lawmakers have told coalition leaders that the government must ensure more funds trickle down to their constituencies instead of concentrating on big-ticket projects like the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) construction in Kuala Lumpur if the ruling coalition wants to receive a strong mandate in the next general election.

The Malaysian Insider understands that the matter was raised during a meeting on Monday night between 100 BN federal lawmakers and Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.



Artist's impression of an MRT station. The BN MPs 'understood' the purpose of the MRT project. — File pic

The lawmakers argued that if Putrajaya could set aside funds for the MRT project, a similar amount should be given to generate economic benefits in more constituencies.

While the BN representatives said they "understood" the purpose of the MRT project, some of them felt that development projects within "rural" constituencies should be given top priority.

MPs who attended the briefing told *The Malaysian Insider* that many had voiced out concerns that further announcements and implementation of "mega" projects would pose a financial constraint in funding to constituencies.

It is understood that some BN leaders present at the meeting had requested an extra RM1 million in allocation of funds on top of the estimated RM1 million usually allocated annually and signed by the district officer of a particular constituency.

"There was a general feeling that it (MRT project) is costly, and that the money could be used for the time being for constituencies for smaller projects. One MP needs millions to do a project in his or her constituency," a BN source told *The Malaysian Insider*.

There is controversy over the estimated cost of the MRT project, which some reports have pegged to be as high as RM50 billion, although the authorities have said the cost cannot be finalised until the MRT alignment is confirmed.

But Umno MP Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan stressed that while BN MPs were very frank with their suggestions during the meeting, none of them voiced out any disagreement with the MRT project.

"Everyone present that evening understood what the MRT was for; questions and points were just raised to strengthen arguments to allow more allocation... it's only as far as MPs who serve in rural areas feel that development projects in their own areas should have been given priority. They were quite frank in giving their input.

"It was not about objection towards MRT, it was about more about wanting more funds to spend on a constituency. They are just saying that the money could have instead been used in rural areas, but the government has a different view about the economy," he told *The Malaysian Insider*.



Abdul Rahman said the MPs were very frank with their suggestions during the meeting. — File pic

The Kota Belud MP said the meeting was an "opportunity" for BN lawmakers to "touch base" with one another, to compare notes and discuss strategies.

He also said that several government ministers were present, including Second Finance Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Husni Mohamad Hanadzlah and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop.

"There was a brief discussion on specific interest, on the improvement of one's own constituency... the time is coming for the annual budget, so we have informed the government of what priorities we want individually," added Abdul Rahman.

He admitted that there were requests for more allocations to be given to MPs' constituencies, but stated that "a lot of numbers" were thrown about and that there was no final decision on the exact amount.

"The DPM said that he will try to accommodate (our requests), that he will talk to Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Najib Razak), but it will depend on whether the government feels the need to increase (the allocation of funds)," said the BN Backbenchers Club member.

Abdul Rahman also said the government's decision to implement the MRT project was proof that BN was a "responsible" coalition.

"The government is responsible whether or not the area is pro-government or not... we still carry on with projects like MRT even though it may be built within areas which are not pro-Barisan, when we could have spent the money in rural areas which are primarily pro-BN. But we do not do this because we are not populist like Pakatan (Rakyat)," the Umno politician said.

Both Pakatan Rakyat and BN leaders have agreed that the next general election will still be won or lost on the economy, where sound reform policies will effectively garner maximum voter support.

Both coalitions have conceded that the Najib administration would still be able to ward off criticisms and win back support if it focused on reforming and addressing economic issues, specifically rising inflation and commodity prices.

The BN government's image has taken a severe beating following the July 9 rally where tens of thousands poured into the city, resulting in nearly 1,700 arrests, scores injured and the death of a PKR division leader's husband.

Its suppression of the Bersih rally drew widespread condemnation from the global media, with UK's *The Guardian* going as far as to compare the Najib government to ousted Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak's regime.

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