

Putrajaya can afford RM50b to scrap highway tolls, says Guan Eng
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 1 — DAP's Lim Guan Eng today denounced the federal government for striking a lopsided deal that benefitted highway toll companies without public consultation, arguing that it could afford to pay RM50 billion to abolish the concessions.

The Penang chief minister accused Putrajaya of "victimising" Penangites when it decided to extend the length of toll charges for two highway companies for another 17 years in exchange for not raising the rates by only 10 per cent.

He argued that if Penangites were given a choice, they would have rather paid the 15 to 25 per cent hikes every five years until 2021, compared to forking over money until 2038 to use the Penang Bridge and the Butterworth-Kulim Expressway (BKE).

"Tan Sri Nor (Mohamed Yakcop) should also explain how the revision deal of extension of the Penang Bridge toll concession from 2021 to 2038 in exchange for no toll hikes of 10 per cent indeed benefits Penangites," he said, referring to the minister in the Prime Minister's Department who is also Umno MP for Tasek Gelugor.

He had previously dared Nor Mohamed to a public debate on whether terminating toll collections by profitable concessionaires would force the government into bankruptcy, after the minister reportedly said such a move would lead to government insolvency.

"BKE is even worse than the Penang Bridge as there will be toll hikes of five per cent for every three years after 2016 instead of every five years," Lim added.

According to Lim, Putrajaya would only need to pay a maximum of RM50 billion to scrap the toll contracts for the North South Expressway (NSE) and the Penang Bridge, adding that the federal government could afford that much.

"RM50 billion will not bankrupt the nation. It is corruption, abuse of power and cronyism that will bankrupt the nation. After all the new MRT project costs more than RM50 billion," the Bagan MP said, repeating a point he had made on several occasions.

Government-linked Projek Leburaya Usahasama (Plus) Bhd is the largest toll company in Southeast Asia and operates the 772km-long NSE and BKE, among others.

Citing from the Global Financial Integrity Report, Lim said that Malaysia's outflows from illicit money had amounted to some RM1.077 trillion.

Lim urged the federal government to stop toll collection on the NSE "immediately", adding that the operator had recouped three times over its original investment of RM6 billion.

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