

Pakatan dangles free education as vote bait to young Malays
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, April 15 — The federal opposition is set to make higher education reform a key policy to win the hearts of young Malays, a demographic it believes will make up the bulk of fence-sitters in the coming polls.

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) strategists told The Malaysian Insider that the coalition will meet next week to fine-tune its policy solution for funding tertiary education in hopes of winning over Malays in their 20s, who make up one-sixth of the voting population.

The meet comes ahead of a key debate between PKR strategic director Rafizi Ramli and Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin this May 3 on whether the PTPTN (National Higher Education Fund Corporation) federal student loan scheme should be discontinued.

“Many fresh Malay graduates will not know about Anwar and the 1998 Reformasi movement. That age group, between 30 and 50, is PR’s strongest age demographic across all races.

“But now the 21 to 30 age group, many of whom are voting for the first time, are finally seeing a very real problem in their daily life being championed by him,” DAP’s Bukit Bendera MP Liew Chin Tong said, referring to Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The PKR de facto leader has led the line in calling for the end of PTPTN, which critics say has saddled many fresh graduates with heavy debt, even before they are gainfully employed.

Rafizi also said the party has been distributing an internal booklet on higher education for its leaders to continue pushing the issue on the ground.

During a demonstration at Dataran Merdeka yesterday by about 500 student activists calling for free education, PKR vice presidents Nurul Izzah Anwar and Chua Tian Chang both rallied the crowd by declaring that “free education is a right for all.”

“This is not just an issue for young voters. Parents are also concerned about their children’s future. This is a key issue for 60 to 70 per cent of the electorate,” Rafizi added.

But the challenge for the opposition is to move the debate from a question of merely abolishing PTPTN, which the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) has been quick to dismiss as a move that will cost RM43 billion and bankrupt the country.

Rafizi has spoken at roundtables and written an exhaustive blog post about how the RM6.1 billion disbursed through PTPTN last year can instead be used to fully fund an additional 100,000 places in public universities as well as the existing 372,000 places.

Speaking to The Malaysian Insider, he insisted that the government did not need to recoup this amount back as PTPTN has only collected RM2.8 billion since being established 15 years ago, about 10 per cent of the loans disbursed so far.

But The Malaysian Insider understands that the writing off of existing loans has not gained full support from its coalition partners.

A source said that while Anwar's assault on higher education was "politically brilliant," he should have consulted with the others first on how to revamp the system as writing off PKR's claimed RM24.7 billion is not a trivial sum.

Even if PR can come to an agreement, analysts believe the opposition must get voters to think of the future as the current trend points towards more expensive private institutions providing a growing proportion of university places.

James Chin, who heads social sciences department at the Monash University in Sunway pointed out that many Malays today are still able to go to Bumiputera-only institutions such as Universiti Teknologi MARA which has a student population of 170,000.

"A lot of Chinese have accepted that the government can't help them with higher education. But if PR can change this, then it will consolidate further their Chinese support, especially for PKR.

"A number of young Malays and those with children will bite but many Malays already believe they are getting help," he said.

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