

Dr M: PTPTN passed when Anwar was DPM
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 15 — The PTPTN (National Higher Education Fund Corporation) loan scheme was approved when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was part of the government, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed pointed out to the opposition leader today.

The former prime minister reminded Anwar that the scheme was approved when the latter held the posts of deputy prime minister and finance minister, adding that there was no objection to the scheme back then.

"That is Anwar... he himself has no idea what he is thinking, he is forgetful," Dr Mahathir was quoted by national news agency Bernama as saying.

The influential leader stressed that Malaysia could not have a free tertiary education unlike "other developed countries."

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"We can abolish the PTPTN, but only for those who want it done away with. The ones that do not want PTPTN to be abolished, we can (continue) giving them," insinuating that those opposing the scheme should not partake of its facilities.

Dr Mahathir stressed that the government had always been committed towards strengthening the country's education sector, and that more than 25 per cent of the annual Budget has been used for the education sector.

The federal opposition has been promoting free education and pushing for the PTPTN to be abolished, insisting that the government could cover the country's education bill with oil profits, and by reducing corruption and plugging leakages in the administration.

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 scheme should be discontinued.

Opposition leader Anwar 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.

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."

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.

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