

**Budget 2013: Living costs of greatest concern to people**  
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 28 — Bread-and-butter issues continue to dominate the wish lists of Malaysians for Budget 2013 as the electorate clamour to make demands of a government they know is heavily dependent on their support for the coming polls.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) pact he heads will face the unenviable task today of revealing a budget that manages to please a sizeable enough population of voters to ensure their future at the ballot boxes.

While economists and think-tank groups have called for careful spending, others are looking to compare BN's Budget 2013 with Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) alternative budget, which outlines romantic promises like free education, a reduction in car prices and a long-term plan to introduce more affordable housing.

Some groups have already expressed support for PR's policies on housing and car prices, likely adding pressure on the government today.

KL and Selangor Car Dealers and Credit Companies Association president Khoo Kah Jin hoped the government would consider a gradual phasing out of car excise duties — a suggestion mooted recently by PR in its plan to reduce the prices of cars.

Khoo wants a gradual phasing out of car excise duties.

Khoo said excise taxes could be reduced by 20 per cent annually over a five-year period which would, apart from reducing car prices, also avoid a shock to dealers and the automobile market.

But for think-tank Research for Social Advancement (REFSA) executive director Teh Chi Chang, however, BN must pay special focus to prudent spending and cut back on unnecessary expenditure to ensure fiscal responsibility.

"I certainly don't want the Budget to grow any bigger. We've already run 15 years of deficit and our national borrowings are reaching alarming levels," he told The Malaysian Insider recently.

"The federal government does not need to spend more. It can spend more effectively.

"For example, if it hadn't paid RM56,000 for binoculars costing just over RM1,000; or if subsidies are going only to the poor, as they should, the Budget can be smaller and we can still be better off," he said.

He expressed alarm that despite 2012's staggering subsidy bill of RM33 billion, over 80 per cent of Malaysian households qualified for the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) RM500 handout.

Teh pointed that this meant that a whopping 5.2 million households only draw monthly earnings of RM3,000 and below.

"I think it's terrible that four out of five Malaysian households have to be on welfare payments, according to BN itself. I wish the federal government would overhaul its subsidy policy," he said.

Najib is expected to announce a second round of BR1M handouts, despite widespread criticism from the opposition that the one-off payments would do nothing to improve the livelihoods of poorer Malaysians in the long run.

Marimuthu wants the government to tackle the soaring prices of food items. But the government appears confident that these payments would suit the lower-income earners well.

Najib's approval ratings shot up significantly to 69 per cent after the first round of handouts, largely due to a surge of support from the poorer households in Malaysia.

Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (FOMCA) president Datuk Marimuthu Nadason hoped to see how the government plans to tackle long-term issues affecting living costs, particularly the soaring prices of food items.

"We are importing RM30 billion of food every year, we need to spent more on food security so we don't need to pay more for imports of food. We need new innovation in agriculture so we can grow more food for Malaysia.

"Overall, we hope on issues of bread and butter," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Apart from these groups, young Malaysians, including students and the growing population of activist youths, are expected to prove a tough audience for Najib to please today with his budget proposals.

Solidariti Mahasiswa Malaysia (SMM) chairman Safwan Anang said youths are hoping to see a budget that promises to abolish the National Higher Education Fund (PTPTN) loans and offer free education to all — a key pledge from PR that is said to have earned the pact much of its youth support.

"That is what we are waiting for," he said.

Majlis Perwakilan Mahasiswa Nasional president Mohd Syahid Mohd Zaini echoed the same, saying: "Ask for free education, if possible, free from pre-school to university."

Aspirasi UTM council president Wan Ahmad Hazwan Wan Daud hoped the government issues a second round of its RM200 book vouchers, which were announced previously together with BR1M.

"Many discounts that we asked for have been given in the undergraduate discount card, but if possible, we want discounts for bus tickets and train tickets," he said.

Najib will table Budget 2013 in Parliament at 4pm today.

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