

## **Candied Budget unlikely to sweeten GE13 for BN, say analysts**

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 29 — Voters have grown more discerning and are unlikely to be swayed by cash incentives and other one-off perks into casting their ballot for the Barisan Nasional (BN) government at national polls due soon, pundits said in weighing in on the impact of Budget 2013.

Political observers interviewed by The Malaysian Insider wholly agreed that the RM251.6 billion announced yesterday, which promised a slew of cash handouts and tax cuts spread across the board, was trained to appeal to key demographic groups in the run-up to the 13th general election, but said voters had become increasingly shrewd and capable of weighing the short-term personal gains against the long-term fiscal impact on the national economy.

“There are only two words to describe it — election budget,” said Monash University’s political science lecturer James Chin.

He noted that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has “pulled out all the stops and given the voters their sentiments, to let them think twice about voting for the opposition” in elections that must be held by next April when BN’s five-year mandate won in March 2008 runs out.

“People will compare the budget to Pakatan Rakyat’s and will also see how the second round of Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) will fuel inflation,” Chin added.

The fledging Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition pact, formed just four years ago in the wake of landmark wins in Election 2008, has promised to raise the disposable income of Malaysians in an alternative set of Budget proposals just two days before the Najib administration unveiled its official proposals for spending and taxes.

Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had said disposable income would rise through fiscal reform measures such as cutting the triple import taxes on foreign-made cars, abolishment of tolls and waiver of student loans, as PR sought to pre-empt Najib’s Budget announcement.

Anwar said a PR government would be able to pay for the proposed measures not through raising taxes but by plugging leakages that arise as a result of inefficiencies and corruption.

Arnold Puyok, a political scientist from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in Sabah, said the goodies announced for the young and singles “is an indication that the ruling party is set to win the hearts and minds of first-time voters in the upcoming election”.

He said it was still too early to tell if such sweeteners will tilt the hotly-contested elections in BN’s favour.

Arnold said it was still too early to tell if the Budget 2013 sweeteners will tilt the elections in BN’s favour.

"Young people are not easily attracted to monetary incentives especially when they are related to electoral politics. They may consider the goodies as a form of government assistance. But whether this is translated into votes remain to be seen," Arnold said.

But another analyst, Faisal Hazis, believes voters have smartened up since Election 2008.

"Voters today are smarter, not so easy for them to fall for sweet deals as before," said the head of political science and international relations at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas).

"Cash handouts like BR1M do not promise permanent support as shown in the Merdeka Center's earlier survey some months back where support for Najib rose several percentage points after the first round of BR1M, but dropped not long after it was handed out," Faisal said.

According to independent pollster Merdeka Center, the PM's personal approval score dipped four percentage points in the last survey in May from 69 per cent to 65 per cent in February, following a repeat in April of last year's violent clashes between police and civil society demonstrators lobbying for the electoral roll to be cleaned up.

Herizal Hazri, deputy country representative for Asia Foundation, a US-based NGO working to improve governance, law and civil society issues through policy, said the people-friendly budget geared towards low-income earners was a positive move to raise the disposable income and spur domestic growth, but highlighted the lack of controls to monitor government spending.

Faisal said voters today are smarter and will not so easily fall for sweet deals as before. "What's worrisome in this budget is that there is no discussion of methods to monitor the implementation of the Budget, whether it will truly be carried out in a transparent manner or otherwise," he said.

Professor Jayum A. Jawan, who lectures on politics and government in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), shared a similar view with Kuching-based Faisal, describing the "one-off handouts" as a populist stunt to fish for votes among the less politically-aware groups who are usually based in rural areas, notably the interior of Malaysia's two easternmost states across the South China Sea which are still largely forested.

"The allocation for transport, public infrastructure, fishermen, farmers and those in Sabah and Sarawak are very welcome. The one worrisome thing is how will all these be delivered? Will all the proposals reach the man in the interior there?" asked the deputy dean of post-graduate studies in UPM's Faculty of Human Ecology.

"The 'one-off' handouts are only temporary and will have a limited impact on some people," he added.

Jayum said he was concerned that the budget was too heavily concentrated on operational costs and cautioned that the government needed to ensure increased productivity levels among the civil service force to balance out the high operating costs.

Like Jayum, Monash University's Chin was also hesitant to say that the people-friendly proposals to cut rocketing costs of living that Najib put forward in Budget 2013 would result in voters paying back the favour to BN at the ballot box where it most matters.

"The ultimate test of the budget will be the stock market reaction on Monday; it will surely go up and will also affect the Astro initial public offering (IPO). It all fits in.

"If he (Najib) does not call for an election now, he's crazy," Chin said.

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