

Analysts: Budget focus on young and rural voters may not bounce BN's game at polls

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By Ida Lim

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 30 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak appears to be betting on delivering a youth- and rural-friendly Budget 2013 to boost his Barisan Nasional (BN) government's electoral chances but analysts say the short-term feel-good initiatives may not be enough to swell its support at national polls due soon.

The RM256.1 billion Budget, was announced on Friday, has been described as an "election budget" as the Najib administration prepares to fight with the federal opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) for votes in the coming polls.

Ibrahim Suffian, director of independent pollster Merdeka Centre, said the Budget is targeted at two major groups, the rural, low-income group and first-time young voters.

"(The) first one is the rural and low-income vote which is typically a strong source of support for BN," he said, adding that the Budget is likely to result in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition keeping its hold on this group.

He said that the Budget may have a greater impact on low-income voters, as "a lot of households are going to miss out" in the government handouts, citing Selangor as an example, where the average household income is more than RM4000.

A second round of RM500 handouts under the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) scheme will be given to households earning less than RM3,000 monthly, while the scheme will also now give RM250 to singles aged 21 and earning less than RM2,000.

He said that even for young voters, the "rural-urban divide" factor will still make a difference.

In rural areas, the "cost of living tends to be lower... money lasts a bit longer and has a bigger impact especially in Sabah and Sarawak", he said.

But the cash handouts do not go very far in urban areas, he said.

He said the rebate for the purchase of smartphones is a "double-edged sword" for BN, saying that people will gain "access to internet" and "there's no controlling what kind of news they get."

Under the Budget, those aged between 21 to 30 and earning less than RM3,000 will get a discount of RM200 when buying a smartphone.

But two other analysts disagreed with Ibrahim, saying that the Budget is not likely to have much effect on rural voters' decisions on who to support.

Datuk Dr Mohammad Agus Yusoff said he had strong doubts as "to what extent this announcement can translate into votes".

He brushed off the effect of handouts under the Budget for low-wage earners, pointing out that sugar prices will now go up by 20 sen per kilogramme with a slash in government subsidies.

The political analyst from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) said that "voters do not have to vote for people who gave you money", saying that the people retain their rights to choose.

"Unless yesterday's Budget promised that this is not a one-off payment but should we be in power, we'll keep on giving it or increasing it... perhaps the outcome will be different," Agus said.

Dr Lim Teck Ghee, Centre for Policy Initiatives (CPI)'s director, said that "the amounts that are being given out to rural and low-income group are very small."

He added that the Budget did not fix the problem of low wages, low-productivity jobs and a lack of opportunities to advance, saying that this group is "unlikely" to be influenced in their voting.

He said that they still have to deal with the rising cost of living.

When commenting on young voters, he said: "I'll be very surprised if it changes their minds."

"They will realise this is an attempt to buy their votes," Lim said, describing the handouts in the Budget as "more like gimmicks."

He also said that in trying to please everyone, the government runs the risk of "pleasing very few people", again pointing to the "small" amount of each handout.

Ibrahim also noted that "voters are becoming increasingly adept at understanding offerings from politicians."

He said that any effect on voters by the Budget "may be limited" as "I strongly suspect people already know there's going to be cash."

He was also "hesitant" to say that there will be a "significant bounce in support for BN."

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