

**Najib woos federal agency workers with better perks**  
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**By Syed Jaymal Zahiid**

KUALA LUMPUR, March 25 — The Najib administration today moved to appease some 40,000 employees of federal agencies by agreeing to boost their benefits ahead of key national polls.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak announced today Putrajaya's approval for a new pension fund, the provision of fixed allowances and gratuity for retirees, and the streamlining of Employees Provident Fund (EPF) contributions for all seven bodies, meaning employers' contribution will be made commensurate with the duration of service.

"This is a government that hears the pulse of the people. We must put the people first," Najib said in his speech before some 2,000 statutory body employees at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

The move came after months of negotiations between Najib's government and workers' unions, which at one point threatened to back the opposition should Putrajaya fail to meet the demands made since 2008, according to an anonymous union leader.

The civil service is a key vote bank for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, which is gearing up for what is set to be its toughest election to date.

Wary of a possible discontent within the public service, Najib moved to placate the key voter group by agreeing to meet their demands for improved benefits as well as increasing pay.

But the prime minister was quick to dismiss suggestions that his government was adopting populist measures to sustain support from the civil servants, saying today's announcement was done after careful consideration based on economic viability.

Najib said populism was a tactic favoured only by the opposition, and argued that meeting the election pledges made by Pakatan Rakyat would bankrupt the country.

"If we take this populist attitude, giving everything without considering the importance of good governance, the country would descend into the valley of economic destruction," he said.

The federal opposition bloc Pakatan Rakyat (PR) had in its election manifesto promised to increase salaries both in the public and private sectors through better management of the economy.

It also promised to continue subsidising fuel and basic goods, where BN announced plans to slash subsidies amid concerns of rising public debt; PR leaders insist their welfare programmes are viable if corruption is tackled.

Najib's government had described PR's pledges as unrealistic, unreasonable and populist. In turn, his administration was accused of courting voters through policies such as the cash handouts under the 1 Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M) that cost more than RM1 billion public funds.

The BR1M programme had contributed significantly to the prime minister's approval rating, according to a previous Merdeka Center survey, and Najib had promised to make it an annual event should BN retain power.

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