

**Annual BR1M cost will balloon to RM11b in public funds, says PKR
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By Syed Jaymal Zahiid**

PETALING JAYA, April 8 — Barisan Nasional's (BN) pledge to pay out the People's 1 Malaysia Aid (BR1M) annually would cost taxpayers as much as RM11 billion a year by 2023, and not solve the woes facing lower-income households, PKR said today.

It added that the pledge to make the popular cash handout a permanent policy also signalled a failure to understand the underlying problems affecting Malaysia's economy.

"This approach is not that smart because it will lead to big spending without changing the economic structure when this RM7 billion to RM11 billion spent yearly can be used to reduce prices, abolish tolls and reduce car prices," party strategy director Rafizi Ramli (picture) told reporters here.

Rafizi said estimates show that BN's aim to increase BR1M to RM1,200 from the current RM500 would cost RM7.2 billion in the first year of its distribution and RM11 billion by 2023.

"It is not going to solve their problems or elevate their economic standing," said Rafizi in an immediate response to BN's elections manifesto unveiled on Saturday.

The young PKR leader was quick to point out that the opposition's criticism of BR1M did not mean it was against giving cash to help the lower-income group but argued against making the programme a frontline policy to help voters cope with inflation.

"It should not be made something that is more targeted towards vote-buying," he said.

Pakatan Rakyat's (PR) manifesto, on the other hand, details how the federal opposition bloc plans to increase household incomes through long-term solutions to fundamental economic problems like increased training and education reform, added the PKR leader.

BN chairman and caretaker Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said his coalition aims to give an eventual cash handout of RM1,200 to low-income families should BN be re-elected with a stronger mandate.

The Umno president, however, denied the policy was a form of "vote-buying" but called it a better way of helping out low-wage earners, pointing out that blanket subsidies would also benefit the rich.

Ahead of key polls, Najib on Saturday presented a "centrist" manifesto themed "Menepati Janji Membawa Harapan" (A Promise of Hope) which included pledges to gradually decrease individual and company taxes.

The manifesto contains pledges covering 17 areas including rural development, fulfilling the aspirations of the youth, education and the fight against corruption and crime.

He also promised to attract investments worth RM1.3 trillion that would in turn create 3.3 million jobs, build more roads in Sabah and Sarawak, streamline good prices for the two east Malaysian states and reduce car prices.

PR leaders alleged BN's polls manifesto was a "copycat" of its own including slashing car prices which the ruling coalition had once claimed would cut government revenue and drive the country bankrupt.

"I think it's a bad mistake for Najib. I think it's better for them to withstand the loss of some votes by not including the idea in their manifesto because it shows that we can actually reduce car prices," Rafizi said.

The car price reduction campaign is one of PR's major items in attracting young voters, a key demographic in Election 2013, into its fold.

"Their whole argument before has been single-handedly demolished in just one day. It is an extreme tactical mistake on Najib's part," said the PKR leader.

Rafizi added that PR would "manipulate to the dire" Najib's blunder in its campaign beginning today to show the feasibility of the opposition bloc's policy proposals.

BN leaders had called PR's manifesto unrealistic and estimated a surge in deficit. Government debt now stands at a whopping 55 per cent to GDP.

PR countered the accusation with its own estimates which showed its pledges, including continued subsidies on basic goods and free education, can be financed with money saved from wastages believed to be costing taxpayers about RM10 billion annually.

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