A tale of the two Budgets

By SIM LEOI LEOI

This is a tale of the two Budgets. Three days before Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's annual reading of the Federal Budget, the opposition front presented its "Alternative Budget." Opposition bigwigs, except for bloc leader Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, turned up in droves to witness the event. The opposition front, comprising PAS, Keadilan Nasional and Parti Rakyat Malaysia, even timed the announcement at 4pm on Tuesday afternoon (Sept 17) at one of the Parliament's meeting rooms.

One senior journalist remarked sarcastically: "They think their budget is going to affect the stock market."

Nevertheless, it was a momentous occasion because the last time the Opposition presented such a budget was before the 1999 general election.

The question is, does the Opposition think elections are imminent?

According to DAP secretary-general Kerk Kim Hock, the Federal Budget as announced on Friday by Dr Mahathir did not indicate so.

"I believe next year's Budget will contain the goodies you have come to expect for an election year."

"But I understand the opposition front intends to bring details of their Alternative Budget to the people in a road-show," he pointed out.

Kerk, whose party spearheaded the 1999 Alternative Budget before splitting acrimoniously from the front last year, claimed that details under the latest opposition budget "were merely counter-proposals."

"It is not really a budget because the Opposition does not have the power to implement its suggestions."

"In 1999, the Alternative Budget was presented to give the public a choice and to tell them that these are our policies. Elections were imminent then and if the Opposition had won, it would have given them the mandate to put our policies in place."

"Barisan Nasional is in power now. It's their duty to present the Federal Budget and our duty to present our views on it," Kerk explained.

Despite not having read through most of the Alternative Budget proposals, Kerk - like many of the MPs in the House - did not seem impressed by it.

"In other countries, when the Opposition tables such proposals, it is expected to come up with ideas on how to obtain the revenue to finance the recommendations."

"You can't simply suggest a RM100 raise for every civil servant without saying where the money's coming from," he argued.

Among the highlights of the Alternative Budget had been the proposed raise, longer maternity leave for fathers, a much longer maternity leave for mothers (up to 90 days plus two weeks' rest before delivery), and housing loan interests for civil servants to be slashed from 4% to 0.5%.

It also contained stinging attacks on the Government's policies and what the Opposition perceived to be rampant abuse of public money and cases of cronism.

According to Datuk Fu Ah Kiow, parliamentary secretary to the International Trade and Industry Ministry, drafting of the Federal Budget ran over months before it could be finalised for tabling.

"Some of the ministries have annual budget dialogues with players in their sectors. In MITI, we get feedback from the industries from as early as May and present these to the Government."

"The Opposition's proposals are very vague, merely giving recommendations that sound good to the people," he commented.

It had not escaped the public that at the start of the reading, Dr Mahathir had remarked dryly his use of the word "Bajet" over the Malay term "Belajawan" in an obvious dig at the Opposition that the latter term did not adequately reflect "revenue inflows."

Not that the Alternative Budget had not been mired in its own controversy.

After disclosing that it had been put together with "assistance" from a Finance Ministry official, Abdul Hadi is now under pressure to reveal the person's identity.

This had, of course, given rise to accusations of the Opposition "hitching on the coattails" of the Government by incorporating its proposals - notably, the one on longer maternity leave.

And the opposition front had brought forward the reading of its budget from the original date of Sept 23 to Sept 17, giving the impression that it was trying to beat the Government to the announcement.

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," replied PAS vice-president and Parti Buntar MP Datuk Dr Hassan Ali to queries from reporters at the end of the Federal Budget reading.

Abdul Rahman Yusof (Kemaman - Keadilan) was more "forthcoming."

"A lot of our proposals were taken up by the Government, especially on the care for the aged, the need to establish a knowledge-based economy and better provisions for women."

"I'm glad because it was an acknowledgment that our proposals were good," he claimed.

The reading of the Alternative Budget would go through as planned on Sept 23, Abdul Rahman insisted.

"We will include the numbers and figures gleaned from the Federal Budget on the income and revenue of the Government into our own. We have not been able to get hold of these before. Then, we will table a more detailed budget than we have given out on Tuesday."

"The Opposition Leader will bring this up in his speech," he said.

The Dewan sits again on Monday.