Election budget? Yes and no

BY SA'OODAH ELIAS

PETALING JAYA: Is the 2003 Budget - described variously as “painless” since it involves no new taxes or tax increases; “people-friendly” for its huge allocations especially in education; and “downright disappointing” - an election budget? No, says the Barisan Nasional; yes, say PAS and DAP.

But PAS’ and DAP’s view on this was not shared by Parti Keadilan Rakyat, which believes that an election budget would have provided more benefits for the man in the street, whereas the 2003 Budget tabled on Friday only provided for the civil servants.

Barisan Nasional (BN) secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat said the budget was always geared towards looking after the welfare of the people every year and elections were a separate issue.

“The Government has always promised that if the economy is good, the people can expect some benefits and that is what has happened this year.

“The allocations for education and others that benefit the lower-income group and incentives for the small and medium-scale industries (SMIs), for instance, are just something that the Government sees needs to be provided for, not simply because of the possibility of a general election,” he said.

He added that only narrow-minded people or those who wanted to score political points would link the budget with a general election.

Barisan, he said, was always ready to face a general election, with or without a good Budget.

PAS vice-president Datuk Mustafa Ali, however, contended that the budget was geared towards a general election.

“That is why there are no tax increases and no new taxes as well as benefits that placed emphasis on the Malays,” he said.

He said it was obvious that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who tabled the budget, saw the declining Malay support as a major obstacle for Barisan, hence the many benefits such as incentives for Class F contractors.

His perception, Mustafa added, was also based on the failure of the budget to provide a long-term framework to address various socio-economic problems faced by the people.

It only provided for short-term and reactive measures that would make the people happy, like the allocations for low-cost housing, he said.

DAP national chairman Lim Kit Siang also saw the budget as an election budget.

“This could be an election budget. The clear signal is the fact that Dr Mahathir had tried to please everyone and that is why no provision that can directly hurt the people has been included.

“He is obviously setting the stage for a general election.”

However, while it was very pleasing on the surface, the budget had, in fact, failed to address many inherent problems, Lim said.

Furthermore, he added, beyond the long list of cosmetic measures, there were no changes in the policy framework.

Keadilan deputy president Abdul Rahman Manan, however, disagreed, saying that if the budget was geared for a general election, more outright benefits would have been provided for the people.

As it was, benefits like the education grants and the tax reduction for SMIs could not be enjoyed by the people directly and would only benefit a select group, he said.

Even the bonus for civil servants, he noted, could not be seen as an incentive for election votes because the group constituted only one eighth of the total workforce and the majority did not get anything to rejoice about.

“I don’t see this as an election budget. Maybe next year, since Dr Mahathir has said that he will be tabling the 2004 Budget,” he said.