Hadi’s bid to debate two Budgets

By IZATUN SHARI

OPPOSITION Leader Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang left a few minutes before Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad finished delivering the Budget speech on Sept 20.

The Terengganu Mentri Besar justified his hasty departure with the explanation that he had to attend an important function in his state.

When the PAS acting president returned to parliament on Monday, a large number of his supporters came along in Terengganu and Kelantan municipal council vehicles.

The women wearing tudung labuh and the men in skullcaps took seats in the public gallery and listened attentively as their leaders debated the Budget.

Abdul Hadi began his speech by citing Quranic verses and expressing his desire to debate two budgets – The Budget 2003 and the opposition’s Alternative Budget.

He said the opposition had the right to draft its own budget and he would present the proposals.

“If Barisan doesn’t want to consider them, we can’t do anything. As long as the people have an alternative,” he said.

In an interview later, Datuk Dr Jamaluddin Jarjis (BN - Rompin) said “the beginning of Abdul Hadi’s speech was merely PAS political innuendos.”

Jamaluddin said Abdul Hadi was repeating political innuendos about Barisan Nasional’s flaws such as alleging its abuse of laws like the Internal Security Act and Official Secrets Act, misusing public funds such as the Employees’ Provident Fund to bail out companies belonging to cronies of leaders, and media abuse particularly RTM for airing Kelantan Dalam Gerhana (Kelantan in Eclipse).

Throughout Abdul Hadi’s two-hour speech (which was somewhat short compared to Budget speeches of previous opposition leaders), he was constantly interrupted by backbenchers who sought to counter his arguments.

But the opposition chief was quick in his retaliation. On one occasion, he even corrected the way a parliamentary secretary recited a verse from the Quran.

“Looks like we have to offer religious classes in the Dewan,” he said in jest. The spectators in the public gallery burst out laughing.

Halfway through his speech, he refused to allow any more opportunities to cut in.

At one point, an impatient backbencher Datuk Bung Moktar Radin (BN - Kinabatangan) jumped from his seat to complain: “Macam ceramah panjang (like a long lecture).”

Abdul Hadi also attempted to belittle Dr Mahathir by saying that the Budget that had been tabled was merely Dr Mahathir’s estimation.

He then criticised several proposals in the Budget, including the practicality of the proposal to give a dollar-for-dollar matching grant for low-income earners. He claimed it would be burdensome to the poor.

Later, when he eventually presented the proposals, which were similar to those announced by Prof K. S. Jomo on behalf of the opposition on Sept 17, Abdul Hadi repeatedly used the expression “If we rule the country, we will implement this strategies... to create a prudent budget for the country.”
Deputy Dewan Rakyat Speaker Datuk Muhammad Abdullah then chided Abdul Hadi for seemingly attempting to table a second budget. “Yang Berhormat, if these are proposals to improve the Budget, I agree, but not as the second budget in the country,” said Muhammad.

To this, Abdul Hadi replied that each MP could submit his or her views during debate.

He continued to outline the opposition’s four strategies to increase Government revenue by between RM10bil and RM12bil, namely by:

- Increasing sales tax by 1% and service tax by 5% excluding for basic necessities like food, education and health;
- Reducing Government’s operational cost by 5%; and
- Increasing dividend pay-outs from national companies such as Petronas, Tenaga Nasional Berhad and Telekom Malaysia.

Other opposition proposals included allowing 50% EPF withdrawal for purchase of the first house and RM100 salary increase for civil servants for 2003 and 2004 on top of annual increment.

For the entire week until Thursday, several MPs ticked off Abdul Hadi for his constant remarks about the possibility of the opposition ruling the country and his attempt to discredit the Government.

Dato Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (BN - Bagan Datuk) likened Abdul Hadi’s ambition to “Angan-angan Mat Jenin” (fantasy of a dreamer) while Dato Luhanie Ahmad (BN - Parit Sulong), expressing similar criticism, said the opposition was daydreaming.

“Basically all the opposition proposals are baseless and destructive to discredit the Government,” said Zahid, who also questioned how the opposition proposed to generate dividend payout from the national companies.

“One way is to ensure that the companies make extraordinary income, which can only be derived through sale of assets. He can’t possibly propose the sale of the assets, can he? I don’t think Abdul Hadi even knows how to manage a company,” he said.

Zahid also defended the Government’s dollar-for-dollar matching grant proposal for the poor, saying that Dr Mahathir wanted to encourage the saving habit among the poor.

“I don’t think it’s burdensome even to the poorest citizen but the saving culture is cultivated,” he said adding that the opposition’s proposal to allow 50% EPF withdrawal for the purchase of first house was also unreasonable.

“On one hand, they proposed the Government to reduce foreign borrowings, on the other hand, they allow more EPF withdrawal.”

“Domestic borrowings are derived from EPF money. If more money is withdrawn, the Government will be forced to get foreign loans.”

Jamaluddin said the opposition blamed the Government for the reduction in foreign direct investment (FDI) but they failed to understand that the country had to face stiff competition from China for FDIs.

“FDIs are sucked by China. We can’t compete with them. That is why we have to shift our focus from manufacturing sector to local industries and service sectors.

“I will dwell on small and medium scale enterprises and service sectors such as transportation, tourism and, Information and Communications Technology when I continue my debate next week,” he said.