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# DEWAN RAKYAT PASSES 2021 BUDGET AT POLICY STAGE

RM322.5b finance bill aims to help country cope with Covid-19 impact

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**T**HE country's biggest and most important annual budget passed its first vote at the policy stage after a voice vote in the Dewan Rakyat yesterday.

The RM322.5 billion finance bill is aimed at helping the country cope with the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and was heavily debated, especially by opposition members of parliament.

No fewer than 62 MPs participated in the 12-day debate of the Supply Bill 2021 after it was tabled by Finance Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz on Nov 6.

All 27 ministries completed their winding-up speeches, which started on Monday, with Zafrul being the last to answer questions and interjections raised by MPs.

He began his winding-up speech at 2.20pm yesterday, and described the Supply Bill 2021 as a "Covid-19 budget for survival and resilience".

"Many quarters have different perceptions of this budget. The reality is that the 2021 Budget is designed for none other than the survival of the people, and the economic resilience of the country.

"It is to protect the wellbeing of the people in terms of health and livelihood, so Malaysians can face challenges of the Covid-19 outbreak, not just in tackling this third wave, but also ready for growth once we overcome the pandemic in the future, *In-syaAllah*."

"Through the 2021 Budget, we want to build resilience so that the people can move towards a brighter future," he said.

Zafrul also announced extra goodies, including the widening of the eligibility for withdrawals under the Employees Provident Fund's (EPF) i-Sinar facility, and an additional RM300 one-off payment to all frontliners in the country, including the police and military officers.

The government also approved an additional allocation of RM50 million for the Sabah government in its fight against the Covid-19 outbreak, channelled through the Covid-19 fund in December this year.

He also promised to table a motion to reduce the RM85 million allocation for the revival of the controversial Special Affairs Department (Jasa) next year.

After each initiative was announced, MPs were seen cheering and thumping the table in agreement.

However, not all MPs were happy with the announcements made.

Nurul Izzah Anwar (PKR-Permatang Pauh) interjected and said a majority of EPF contributors had less than RM10,000 in their accounts.

"For those with plenty in their accounts, there is no problem. But my stand is that EPF savings should be used as a last resort.

"What are the steps being taken by the government to take care of not just those with more money in their EPF accounts, but also those who have much less?" she asked.

Zafrul, in his reply, said his ministry and EPF had conducted a scenario sensitivity analysis, and had weighed the matter in detail before allowing the expansion of the withdrawal.

"From our analysis, this extension will not affect the dividends or returns to EPF, and will help more people at the same time."

Ministries were allocated 30 minutes to present their winding-up speech, but Zafrul's went

People watching Finance Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz delivering his winding-up speech on the 2021 Budget in Parliament, in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

on for an hour, with several opposition lawmakers standing up asking for explanations.

Several MPs argued that since the sitting would not adjourn until all debates were done, the speaker should allow more time for Zafrul to answer more questions raised.

To this, Speaker Datuk Azhar Azizan Harun said: "Please allow the minister to answer. The time for debates has ended and we've all criticised the budget.



"Now allow the minister to answer."

As Zafrul tried to finish his winding-up speech, more MPs stood up to interject, including Khalid Abdul Samad (Amanah-Shah Alam), Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman (Independent-Muar) and P. Prabakaran (PKR-Batu).

A shouting match then erupted, with Khalid saying that the Perikatan Nasional government had "falsified facts" and "lied" about engaging with the opposition to discuss the budget.

"We were only engaged once, before the budget was tabled."

More ruckus ensued, with MPs breaking out into more arguments before Azhar stepped in

and told Zafrul to continue.

"This is embarrassing behaviour. We are debating the budget. The people are watching us," he said.

Azhar, who presided over the session, then put the budget to a voice vote, and announced that more voices in support of the budget were heard.

Datuk Mahfuz Omar (Amanah-Pokok Sena) then moved to initiate a bloc vote, but his bid failed to materialise with two people short of the minimum 15 they needed to support it.

A majority of the 13 were lawmakers from Amanah, while two others were Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his son, Dafuk Seri

Mukhriz Mahathir of Parti Pejuang Tanah Air.

The bill will now move to the committee stage on Monday, where funds for each ministry would be closely scrutinised.

This stage would involve 10 days of extensive debates where lawmakers would decide whether or not to include amendments proposed by the lower house, before going to a vote for the third reading.

Once the budget receives a simple majority vote, it will then be forwarded to the Senate, and later approved by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong within 30 days of the date it was presented to him. **Additional reporting by Arfa Yunus**