Populist move that could alienate voters

POLITICAL analysts questioned Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim’s proposal to write off federal student loans, stressing the populist move was a political ploy for the impending national polls.

Centre for Public Policy Studies chairman Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam told The Malay Mail that scrapping the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) was not “prudent, pragmatic or sustainable”.

“Why scrap the loans when the students should be in a position to pay?” asked the economist and former Transport Ministry secretary-general.

“It is a huge amount to be scrapped and it will have serious implications on the deficit budget. It also does not encourage fiscal discipline on part of the government and especially students who may be even more deserving.

“Secondly, if you cancel the loans, what have we got for the future generations of students who may be even more deserving?”

Navaratnam said the public must understand that there was no “free lunch” and the country could not afford the cost in the long term.

“You can’t fritter your resources away for temporary gain, particularly for election. We must have a long-term view of the country and not a short-term, narrow perspective,” he said.

James Chin, head of the School of Social Sciences at Monash University, said Pakatan Rakyat might alienate voters that they were trying to woo with the populist announcement.

“Pakatan Rakyat feels it can gain votes from the Chinese community because people who benefited (from PTPTN) are bumiputras,” he said.

“But I think it is a bad idea because PTPTN has allowed many people, especially non-Malays, access to higher education. So the group that will suffer the most won’t be the Malays.”

PKR strategy director Rafizi Ramli revealed that abolishing PTPTN was a party pledge and had not been discussed at Pakatan Rakyat (PR) level.

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng questioned how PKR hoped to implement the policy without its component parties’ approval.

“They have to make up their mind. Is PKR saying that it is going to form the government on its own? How is it going to implement it without DAP and PAS?” he asked.

“We must first understand where is this money going to come from? What will be the source of the fund? The government has issued bonds to finance PTPTN and the government still have to pay the interests for the bonds even if PTPTN was cancelled.”

Universiti Utara Malaysia School of International Studies dean Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani said PKR was willing to throw everything but the kitchen sink to win the next general election.

“I think it is politicising to attract young votes,” he said.

“I am sure it is willing to give everything to get in power. BN can also come with populist policy but it has to be realistic. They cannot promise everything.”