

Khatiwada under fire from lawmakers over pork barrel

The decision to allocate Rs 40 million for each parliamentary constituency amid criticism from various quarters has backfired on Finance Minister Yuba Raj Khatiwada as lawmakers from both the ruling and opposition parties have accused him of undermining the elected lawmakers in not giving them exclusive authority to spend the money.

The lawmakers came down heavily on Khatiwada for his remark that he allocated the constituency budget only because he found himself in a trap of the lawmakers' making.

Several lawmakers from both sides, airing their views in parliament, criticized Khatiwada for disparaging the lawmakers in accusing them in this fashion.

"I wonder why a finance minister should feel trapped into taking a decision about allocating budgets meant for the development of the constituencies. The statement is irresponsible," said NCP lawmaker Ram Kumari Jhankri, taking part in parliamentary discussions over budget that commenced on Thursday. The finance minister unveiled a Rs 1.35 trillion budget on Tuesday.

Lawmakers are unhappy with the finance minister as he has made it mandatory to spend the Rs 40 million only in coordination with a provincial lawmaker representing the constituency in question as well as local elected representatives. In the past, the central lawmakers were allowed to spend the money as their exclusive prerogative.

The new arrangement allows expenditure of the budget in not more than three different projects whereas in the past the lawmakers could distribute the money to any number of programs or projects.

The finance minister set the limit after finding that the constituency budget was distributed for a variety of unproductive programs just to please the voters.

Ruling Nepal Communist Party lawmaker Gajendra Bahadur Mahat of Jumla criticized the decision of the government to include provincial assembly members and local representatives in program selection. "Can a minister fix the limit of our jurisdiction, can he take us on par with the ward committee chairman? We don't need any 40 million allocated in this humiliating way," Mahat said during the budget discussion.

Hridayash Tripathi, who was elected to parliament with the ruling left alliance's support, also came down heavily on the finance minister for not reposing trust in the lawmakers. "Lawmakers are elected representatives and they have commitment and responsibility toward the people. Can the government elected by the lawmakers in parliament call our trustworthiness into question?" he said.

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Former minister and NCP lawmaker Tek Bahadur Basnet criticized the finance minister for accusing the people's representatives of trapping him. "The statement has incited distrust of the representatives. Either the state should trust the people's representatives or withdraw the decision to allocate the Rs 40 million constituency budgets ," said Basnet.

Rajendra Gautam of the same party demanded that the preconditions for the constituency budget should be revised and roads, drinking water and irrigation incorporated under its scope. Durga Paudel of Rastriya Janamorcha said that the budget fails to provide financing for development expenses and has left room to wonder if it was not a repetition of past trends.

Min Bahadur Bishwakarma and Bharat Shah of the main opposition Nepali Congress criticized the budget for lacking any vision and plan for meeting the 8 percent economic growth target. Opposition lawmakers condemned the budget for not giving continuity to the decisions taken by the NC-led erstwhile government and for allocating minimal budgets for the local and provincial levels.

Rejendra Shrestha of the Federal Socialist Forum Nepal and Sharat Singh Bhandari and Anil Kumar Jha of Rastriya Janata Party Nepal accused the government of undermining federalism in the budget allocation.

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