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Eyebrows raised at House's development projects

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House plans to build luxurious apartment building

Lawmakers say govt's plan to raise House's budget by 33% too small

Ignoring public outcry, the House of Representatives is determined to push for a higher budget increase to revamp the House of Representatives complex in Senayan, Central Jakarta, including some "dubious" projects such as a luxurious apartment complex for lawmakers and a park for demonstrators to hold rallies in.

It has added to the numerous criticisms levelled at the House, whose members have been slammed for a poor legislative performance and rampant corruption.

At first, the House's Domestic Affairs Committee (BURT) proposed in April an increase of its budget to Rp 7.2 trillion (US$537.8 million) next year, a 70 percent increase compared to Rp 4.3 trillion this year.

The committee proposed that Rp 4.87 trillion of the 2018 budget be used to support the House's duties while the remainder would be allocated to improve the House's secretariat.

However, in July, the Finance Ministry suggested that the House would receive Rp 5.7 trillion for next year, only a 33 percent increase.

President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo is scheduled to elaborate on the 2018 planned state budget while reading a financial note at the House on Aug. 16. Many believe the President will reaffirm what the ministry has suggested.

Regardless, lawmakers said they would continue to seek a higher increase specifically to finance the construction of the apartment complex. They argue their official residences in Kalibata, South Jakarta, some 10 kilometers from the House, are too far away and not fit for purpose.

"We've asked [the government] for a Rp 7.2 trillion budget allocation for 2018, but they've only granted us Rp 5.7 trillion so far. But that's not final yet. We [the House and government] will discuss it again later. The government wouldn't inconvenience us lawmakers [by having us live in Kalibata]," BURT member Anton Sihombing said on Monday.

"There must be [an apartment block]. Our housing complex is too far from here, it's not worth it," added the Golkar Party lawmaker.

Anton claimed it was also urgent to revamp the offices of the lawmakers, which he said were no longer adequate to accommodate the legislators and their staff. When it was first built in 1992, the building was designed to have a capacity of 800 people. At that time, there were a total of only 400 lawmakers, he said.

Currently, the House has a total of 560 members, each of whom has at least two expert staffers and three assistants. Starting from 2019, this number will increase to 575 as a consequence of the recently passed election bill.

The House also plans to earmark some of the 2018 budget for building "a square of democracy," an open space for the public to hold rallies in, as well as a museum and a library.

No detailed budget plans for any of the projects have been released.

The House's budget committee head Aziz Syamsuddin, also of Golkar, claimed he had no idea about a plan to use part of the proposed Rp 7.2 trillion 2018 budget allocation to construct a new building.

He said BURT had not discussed the matter with the committee.

House secretary-general Achmad Djuned did not deny the plan to build an apartment block.

"We have yet to fully discuss the apartment plan. Indeed, it is a long-term plan," Djuned said.

He claimed the proposal to renovate the House complex had come up since 2009, it had to be repeatedly postponed because of the government's budget-streamlining policies

Indonesian Parliament Watch (Formappi) has stated that, as of June, the House had put in the worst performance since the Reform era, with only four out of 50 priority bills being passed.

"Why should the public favor their demands, while they have yet to show a serious commitment as legislators and are too busy with their own political interests?" Formappi observer Lucius Karus said.

"It's better for the lawmakers to improve their working performance. The public will support them [getting a bigger budget] if they put in a good performance," Lucius said.

In 2015, Jokowi refused to sign a stone plaque to symbolize the establishment of seven new House buildings because he felt the project plans were not clear.