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Signal is clear for Hishammuddin-Mahfuz debate on Malay rights

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THE signal is clear for Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein to go ahead with the planned one-on-one debate with his Pas counterpart Mahfuz Omar. Not that Hishammuddin was hesitating earlier but the green light from Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Thursday would indeed have given him a boost.

If he had at all hesitated earlier, it could perhaps be because his "elders" in Umno had advised him against holding it as it would simply bring no benefit to the Malays.

Even Pas murshidul aam (spiritual adviser) and Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat thought it a bad idea.

Later, Pas deputy president and Terengganu Menteri Besar Abdul Hadi Awang begged to differ and said that it was not such a bad idea after all.

Mahfuz should proceed with the debate, he said.

Now with Dr Mahathir backing the Umno Youth chief, the show then must go on. Umno, Umno Youth and possibly a large section of the Malays are counting on Hishammuddin and his boys to show Pas what they've got.

"We have to show that we are not cowards," an Umno Youth exco member said when asked to comment on Mahfuz's response. So it is also a question of reputation and image, after all.

"The ball is now in Umno Youth's court. We know that it will be held next month, some time before the start of puasa. Details on the nature and form of the debate are being worked out."

Umno Youth is also deciding on who the moderator will be and whether the debate will be shown live over TV (networks other than RTM) or whether there will be an audience.

(Former vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaya, Prof Diraja Ungku Aziz, is among several names proposed as the moderator. It was Mahfuz who had proposed his name.)

Mahfuz did not insist on conditions for the debate. Everyone said he was gentleman enough to have gone personally to hand over the letter agreeing to take up Hishammuddin's challenge on Sept 29.

One thing that Hishammuddin has made clear is that he did not want the debate to be exploited for political gains and for it to be turned, inadvertently of course, into a circus.

He is probably reminded of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia fiasco when Zein Isma Ismail, an Umno Youth executive council member, represented him in a meeting with students. (Hishammuddin was indisposed and was not able to attend).

Needless to say and predictably too given Umno's battered image then, it was probably an experience Zein had put far behind him. And it is certainly something Hishammuddin wants to avoid.

How the debate will be conducted will not change the fact that the outcome will be political because the speakers are politicians.

A political analyst said that it would, perhaps be different if the speakers were non-politicians. Perhaps, even academicians.

"The issue of Malay special rights is not new. It is not an issue in that sense. The point is that it is being interpreted differently by the political parties. We must remember that Malaysians - Malays and non-Malays alike - have accepted it," he said.

Will it solve problems between Umno and Pas? And will it clear the air on issues that are confusing people?

Not really, said a Malay intellectual. Pas will have its own stand and will be defending it in the same way Umno will. The debate between Hishammuddin and Mahfuz will not help to significantly clarify matters.

Certainly, rhetorics will be traded and exchanged. And there will be some demonstration of emotions.

Nevertheless, to dismiss the debate as a complete waste of time is not altogether true. Nor is it fair. It will certainly enable people to see the speakers' point of view and that cannot be a waste of time.

How effective the outcome of the debate in achieving the desired objectives depends on how it will be conducted. What is important, perhaps, is that the environment must be controlled, given that it is a political debate.

How much control not to render the debate into an academic exercise is up to the sponsors and organisers to work out.

Certainly, Hishammuddin has now to consider many factors not to allow this to be a debacle. His reputation too is at stake. Besides, everyone - including Umno and Pas and their partners - is waiting for this. Not an easy task for Hishammuddin. But then somebody has got to do it.

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