

11/01/2001

Debate off in the interest of a bigger cause

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THE much-anticipated "great debate" between Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and his Pas counterpart Mahfuz Omar is off.

For Hishammuddin, it has to be called off in the interest of a bigger cause - the proposed Malay unity talks between the presidents of Umno and Pas.

To him, the debate, especially if it were to end in hostility, may jeopardise the efforts to get the top party leaders to meet and discuss Malay unity.

However, Mahfuz is adamant that the debate must proceed.

When news that Umno leaders and Hishammuddin had agreed for the debate to be called off, Pas Youth went on a name-calling spree.

Hishammuddin shrugged off the allegations that he was a coward.

"I am not bothered ... what is more important to me is the nation's future."

Sounds sober and mature, but political realities may not be too kind on Hishammuddin, especially when Mahfuz is still pushing for the debate.

"If Mahfuz wants to be a hero, let him. I am more concerned about the future of the country and the Malays. I for one do not want to be dragged into this game," said Hishammuddin.

The debate was proposed following demands made by Suqiu which Umno Youth claimed had questioned the special treatment for the Bumiputeras.

Pas Youth chose not to take up Umno's problems with Suqiu and instead accused its political nemesis as being the one which had allowed the erosion of Malay rights and privileges.

And while Umno Youth locked horns with Suqiu, Pas Youth took the opportunity to challenge Umno Youth to a debate on the issue of Malay rights.

Hishammuddin accepted the challenge and the decision was endorsed by Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Likewise, Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor gave the go-ahead for Mahfuz to pursue the matter.

Pas' mursyidul aam (spiritual adviser) Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat on the other hand expressed doubts about the debate from the beginning.

He was of the view that the debate would not lead to anything, and preferred instead a debate between Dr Mahathir and Fadzil.

Now that the two party leaders seem set to face each other, though not in a debate but in a discussion (or muzakarah, if one prefers an Arabic/Islamic slant), Nik Aziz ought to be happy.

His "idea" has been taken up by the party's leaders, meaning he is supportive of the move to call off the debate between Hishammuddin and Mahfuz?

Wrong. Nik Aziz is now expressing scepticism over the proposed unity talks, saying that the initiative has come "too late and that Umno should have agreed when Pas proposed it years ago".

This is not unexpected given the twists and turns in politics.

Yet, it is significant to note that a proposed formal and structured debate has been replaced by one that knows no rules, with Mahfuz definitely the proposer and Hishammuddin the opposer, on whether the Malay unity debate should have been pursued regardless.

In the meantime, the audience can expect to be treated to a heightened display of political gamesmanship; and they won't be spared the free-flow

of contradictions and justifications, and ironies and rhetorics.

But for argument's sake, is there truly any need for Hishammuddin and Mahfuz to engage in a debate.

As pointed out, it all started because of the demands made by Suqiu which were deemed to have touched on the special position of the Bumiputeras.

Now that Suqiu has decided to put aside the contentious demands following talks with Umno Youth, what need is there for either party to debate the Malay rights issue, apart from for the sake of laying claim to being the greater fighter for Malay rights?

The idea of a debate between the two youth chiefs was supported because it was felt that the exercise could pave the way for the parties' top leaders to engage in free and open discourse.

Now that the top leaders have shown signs of being prepared to hold their own discussions, what is there to be achieved from the debate except from using it as a vehicle for an ego trip?

And, why bother about a debate between the duo. Isn't it already on-going?

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