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Nazri-Salahuddin debate on SAR goes smoothly

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The debate between Umno supreme council member Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz and Pas Youth deputy chief Salahuddin Ayub on Sekolah Agama Rakyat (People's Religious School) went smoothly although the swearing by the Quran did not take place as scheduled.

Instead the duo agreed to sign a joint statement that was prepared by a committee comprising senior officers of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, headed by director-general Datuk Abdul Aziz Deraman.

The statement called on the Government, political bodies, non-governmental organisations and individuals to shoulder the responsibility of supporting and carrying out an integrated education system balancing religious needs and worldly demands.

The two-hour debate at DBP's Balai Budaya Tun Syed Nasir ended cordially, with Nazri and Salahuddin hugging each other and exchanging gifts.

They were each given 30 minutes for the first round, 20 minutes for the second round and 10 minutes for the winding up.

Titled "Sekolah Agama Rakyat - Cabaran Masa Hadapan dan Harapan" (Future Challenges and Hope), the debate, jointly organised by Perak Pas Youth and the Chenderoh Umno Youth division, was witnessed by about 800 people, including supporters from Umno and Pas.

The debate was a result of a counter challenge by Salahuddin to Nazri, who had challenged the former to swear by the Quran over allegations that the Government planned to close down the privately-run religious schools.

Nazri, who is also Entrepreneur Development Minister and former acting Umno Youth chief, took part in the debate in his personal capacity but had the backing of Umno.

Salahuddin also had the endorsement of the Pas central committee.

Salahuddin maintained that the Government's ultimate aim of withdrawing the per capita grant to SAR was to close down the religious schools.

He said things were made worse for the schools when the Government offered to absorb the teachers into national schools, and parents and students were threatened with issues created and either published or aired through mainstream media.

He also named six schools in Johor which had been ordered to stop operation by the Johor Religious Department, showing letters addressed to two of the affected schools which stated that the order to close came from the Johor Government.

Nazri said the Government did not make a decision to close down the SAR and that the schools could apply to get the grant reinstated.

"Of course we will conduct checks on the schools before any decision to give back the grant is made," he said.

Nazri also denied the withdrawal of the per capita grant was a political decision made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad alone.