

Rafizi squashes KJ in London debate
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“Khairy was good, but Rafizi was better” was the considered opinion of various members of the audience when asked to comment on the dynamic battle of wits between Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin and PKR’s strategic director Rafizi Ramli.

What a shame that Malaysians at home missed a lively, stimulating and exciting debate because this is what intellectual discourse is all about. No slanging matches. No name-calling atypical of the usual parliamentary exchanges across the floor of the Dewan Rakyat.

The lively banter between Khairy and Rafizi, was an inspiration for Malaysia’s youth and debates like this should be replicated in Malaysia.

Both are products of British universities and the civility that they showed, with the enthusiastic crowd egging them on, should prove to the old guard in Umno that debates in the public realm are healthy and not to be feared. Although not in the Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich league, for Malaysia it was a brilliant first attempt.

The two contenders presented their arguments at the first event of 2012 organised by the United Kingdom and Eire Council for Malaysian Students. Their topic was ‘Public Policy: Vision 2020 - Is Malaysia moving towards the right direction?’

It was not the debate Rafizi wanted. His proposal was to discuss the National Feedlot Centre (NFC) controversy. The first unofficial request to Khairy, went via the media, on Nov 14, followed by the formal invitation a week later. These fell through, but the London event was its alternative.

Students had sacrificed their Sunday to hear the other speakers, Rafidah Aziz, Marina Mahathir, Pang Khee Teik, Yunis Raiss, Karim Raslan, Zainah Anwar, Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad and Dr Carool Kersten.

Without doubt the star-attraction was the ‘Khairy and Rafizi’ segment. Attendance was low in the morning but by the time their session was due, the conference hall was full and spilled over into an adjoining room.

The rivals were like chalk and cheese. The gregarious and gung-ho Khairy looked smart and businesslike in his bespoke suit. Tall and dark, he presented a stark contrast to the affable and accommodating Rafizi, whose electric blue jumper, the colours of Keadilan, sent out subtle subliminal messages.

If Khairy seemed like the ‘Action Man’ figure (as in the boy’s action figure toy), Rafizi (right) presented an image of a methodical and thorough person, a testament to his accountancy background.

If Khairy looked like he was a notch above the crowd, Rafizi in his smart casual attire, appeared more assured and approachable, displaying neither aloofness, nor pretence.

Many familiar with Khairy’s previous talks, opined that he would probably be the better orator in both Malay and English, and doubted if Rafizi could match the Umno Youth leader’s debating skills.

They were proven wrong.

Speaking from the heart

Throughout the debate, Khairy failed to gain any advantage over Rafizi. Khairy appeared to be trying too hard. He probably expected a thrashing on the Shahrizat Abdul Jalil debacle and was disorientated when

Rafizi ignored issues like the NFC.

Rafizi secured an early impact by acknowledging the role played by former PM Dr Mahathir Mohamed, who he credited with giving the nation a sense of direction. Rafizi summarised the state of the economy and said that if Vision 2020 were to be achieved, the target set for the annual rate of economic growth should have been maintained since 1990, but that this was unsustainable. Moreover, the economic target had been missed.

new economic policy nepRafizi's talk was sprinkled with facts which were easily grasped because they related to the man in the street. He spoke about the disparity of wealth, and that 40 percent of the nation, with a monthly income of RM1,500 or less, were mostly bumiputeras.

He contrasted this with the obscenely wealthy people in the top echelons of society who made up a small fraction of the community. He connected facts with the people's anger.

Khairy failed to downplay Rafizi's bleak assessment of the economy and bombarded the crowd at dizzying speed, with figures and acronyms like the ETP, FDI, the Human Development Index and the Asian financial crisis.

Was this deliberate? Was his intention to confuse or had he made a mistake? There was too much to absorb in one go. It was hard to verify and difficult to relate to the average struggling Malaysian.

Acknowledging that he was speaking from the heart, Rafizi's arguments came in easily digestible portions whereas Khairy's use of statistics appeared to be blinding us with science and made him appear wooden, as if his speech was scripted.

The Umno Youth leader repeatedly challenged the Rafizi on unity in Pakatan Rakyat and quipped: "How solid is the union of PR?"

Using Kedah, Khairy attacked the menteri besar's stance on the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA), his treatment of students and the inconsistencies within Pakatan.

NONENevertheless, there were many points of agreement. Khairy praised some bits of the Buku Jingga, and agreed with the opposition on the necessity for the declaration of assets.

Khairy endorsed Rafizi's assertion that Malaysia always manages to bounce back in times of hardship only because of the resilience of its people. Rafizi's contention was: "...we have to trust you, the society...." and that political parties must "engage with the people".

Khairy stressed that his was the voice of reform within Umno. He disagreed with the "parallel lives" perpetuated by our schools, and the politics of Perkasa and Ibrahim Ali.

Rafizi presented Pakatan's solid written policies and constitution. He was disparaging of BN, which could only manage a loosely jumbled list of achievements built on the country's 50 years of development, instead of a constitution.

NONEKhairy defended his government and featured Najib's reforms, the ISA repeal, the proposed amendment to UUCA, Malaysia's liberal society and the fact that his party was committed to free and fair elections.

The men played to their perceived political strengths but Rafizi had the edge over Khairy. At least twice during their exchanges, Rafizi praised Khairy's popularity, especially among the students, many of who are Kelab Umno members. At one time he even dubbed Khairy a "national asset". However, he added that in spite of this, Khairy's popularity could not translate into influencing the cabinet or the prime minister.

Rafizi hoped that Khairy would become Home Minister and later teased him about the possibility of becoming an Education Minister to help push through the various reforms which he had mentioned. At one point, he even tried to entice the Umno Youth leader to consider joining the opposition, because of their similarities and shared views.

One political observer said: "Rafizi won on style and substance. Khairy was squashed".

A student said, "Rafizi 1, Khairy 0."

If this was a contest between the lightweights, we should look forward to a match of the decade between the heavyweights, Anwar Ibrahim vs Najib.

We will see if Khairy can convince Najib, to take on Anwar in 'the rumble in the jungle'.

But for now, it's game, set and match to Pakatan.

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