

Debate could be potential banana peel to DAP
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Terence Netto

COMMENT Has DAP's Lim Guan Eng, by agreeing to debate MCA's Dr Chua Soi Lek tomorrow, unwittingly walked into a trap?

This suspicion has popped up even as the organisers of the debate reiterated that its title remains the same that was agreed to when the debate was first mooted: 'Is the two-party system becoming a two-race system?'

dap conference 080112 lim guan engThe title clarification by the co-organiser of the debate, The Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (Asli), was compelled because of unconfirmed reports that the initial theme had been changed to 'The future of the Malaysian Chinese'.

The change would doubtless have elicited a demurrer from the DAP secretary-general and Penang chief minister that his party was not so much concerned with the future of the Chinese Malaysian as with the future of its entire people.

It's not really surprising the pre-debate atmospherics did lead to a point where questions arose as to the actual title of the debate.

After all, the idea of the debate came about in the context of a day-long forum whose title 'The Chinese at a Political Crossroads in the Next General Election' is of parochial import.

Need one be surprised that, perhaps, pressure at one stage was brought to bear for the initial - and rather murky - title of the debate to be changed so that it be consonant with overall theme of the forum, one of whose organisers is an MCA think-tank whose focus must necessarily be sectarian.

A potential minefield

But even if the title of the debate remains unchanged from the original - and rather ambiguous - header 'Is the two-party system becoming a two-race system', that and the fact that it will be held principally in Mandarin, would leave the DAP and its major domo, Lim Guan Eng, vulnerable to the broadsides of its inveterate enemy, the Umno-owned Utusan Malaysia.

Is it difficult to envisage a jigsaw of headlines in the paper and other Umno-owned media outlets the next day that would conceivably exploit any hint Lim, in the throes of debate, could plausibly leave that his orientation is culpably Sino-centric rather than inclusively Malaysian?

Is this overly dark a foreboding of what could transpire at the debate and in its aftermath, given the predictable tendencies of the Penang chief minister's inveterate enemies in the press?

Lim is no slouch at the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate, as anyone who has watched him in the Penang State Assembly would aver.

But a debate in Mandarin on a diffuse title is potentially a banana peel to a party which espouses a 'Malaysian Malaysia' and has latterly been concerted in its drive to attract more Malays to its ranks in pursuit of that goal.

Lim has only to advert to his more seasoned Pakatan Rakyat campaigner, Anwar Ibrahim, on the potential minefield questions on subjects of inherent ambiguity pose to a Malaysian opposition politician attempting to strike a balance between contending interests and cultures.

Anwar in recent weeks has had to hightail his original stances on the propriety of obsolete laws against sodomy and the two-state solution to the problem Palestine out of the blast area into which he waded as a result of questions from western liberal publications like Wall Street Journal and Financial Times.

Penang CM on greasy turf

The title of the Lim versus Chua debate implies that the Umno of BN has become or has had to become unwarrantedly Malay-centric as Chinese voters overwhelmingly shift to backing the opposition Pakatan which as a consequence would become more non-Malay in its orientation.

Implicit in the title is the assumption that the massive shift of Chinese votes away from the BN would only mean a consequently Malay-centred Umno in contention with a dominantly Chinese-supported Pakatan.

Hence the present two-coalition (read two-party) system would devolve into a largely Malay versus a mainly Chinese race system.

Interpreted this way, the title of the Lim-Chua debate would peg DAP's chief spokesperson within the confines of a duopoly of race in preference to his party's credo of a unifying collage of Malaysian races.

Lim may have foreseen some of the dangers posed by tomorrow's debate on the agreed topic which is probably why he has proposed that there be a second debate with Chua, in Bahasa Malaysia and in English, preferably on a more sharply defined title.

As it stands, the title of the tomorrow's debate is a greasy turf on which an opposition leader intent on espousing an inclusive vision of a Malaysian future could slip up.

If 'never give a sucker an even break' is the motto of the rabidly anti-DAP forces, then refraining from traipsing on shifty turf should be the party's prudential stance.

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