

More a ceramah than a debate
MalaysiaKini.com
February 19, 2012
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After all that anticipation and excitement drummed up by the media, the debate between Chua Soi Lek and Lim Guan Eng turned out to be a disappointment.

It was less a debate and more a political ceramah in which both sides seized the opportunity to speak well of their own party and expose the shortcomings of the other. Neither of them said anything refreshing. What they said was what we had read in the media countless times before.

When it came to question time, they mostly fought shy of answering the questions posed and instead went off at tangents to say the things they wanted the public to hear.

In this case, they were certainly not thinking of only the audience in the Berjaya Times Square hall where the debate was being held but also the larger audience watching the live telecast.

Chua, the president of MCA, was the first to speak. But instead of addressing the title of the debate, 'Chinese at a Crossroads: Is a Two-Party System Becoming a Two-Race System?', he came out with guns blazing.

His target was of course Pakatan Rakyat for "lying" that if it came to power, it could rein in PAS and prevent it from establishing an Islamic state. He also shot down the DAP by calling it a slave of PAS.

The themes of Chua's eight-minute spiel were 'Don't vote for the opposition', 'We must reject Islamic leadership as well as the DAP for helping PAS', 'The Chinese cannot be leaders in any state other than Penang; even in Perak and Kedah, the Pakatan menteri besar were from PAS'. Ho hum.

Race - the elephant in the room

It sounded like a desperate call from the leader of a Chinese party that knew its survival was in danger. In relation to the topic, Chua had nothing to say about moving out of race-based politics. He couldn't have, anyway.

Debate Chua Soi Lek And that was the cross Lim could have nailed him to. To an extent, he did, when he talked about the need for a two-party system that considered the interests of "Malaysians", unlike the BN system in which Umno took care of the Malays, the MCA the Chinese, the MIC the Indians, and promoted the two-race division of "Malays" and "non-Malays".

Pakatan leader Anwar Ibrahim, he added, was not for Malays alone; Anwar respected the rights of all Malaysians. Pakatan was also against corruption, and that was something that transcended race. Again, old hat.

Lim could have taken it further and asked Chua why the MCA was still practising race-based politics when it should be irrelevant in today's Malaysia, but he didn't. And perhaps he didn't have to.

Chua betrayed himself when he spoke about the Pakatan governments in Penang and Selangor not having given land for the building of Chinese schools, and boasted that the BN government in Perak had given thousands of acres for this purpose. Harping on Chinese rather than Malaysian issues, he seemed hopelessly outdated - and irrelevant.

Debate Lim Guan Eng On the whole, it was clear that Lim, the secretary-general of DAP and also chief minister of Penang, was more inclusive in his stance and outlook.

He spoke, as he must have done countless times before, of Penang being the first state in Peninsular Malaysia to have signboards in Malay, Chinese and Tamil, and even in Jawi. He spoke of the Penang government giving land every year for the building of Chinese, Tamil and national schools.

This being so, Chua couldn't resist striking a low blow when Lim asked him about the PKFZ (Port Klang Free Zone) scandal and why only MCA leaders had been brought to trial while the Umno ones had been left untouched. Chua dismissed it as a question that reeked of racial sentiment ("berbau perkauman").

I don't think Lim meant it to be racial, but wily Chua twisted it to make it sound so. From Lim's facial expression, one could see he was winded.

Lim disadvantage during question time

Lim might have known he was taking on an opponent who was virtually playing on home ground. The debate was co-organised by the Asian Strategic Leadership Institute (Asli) and MCA think-tank Insap. It afforded Chua the luxury to play to the gallery of home supporters, which he often did.

When the floor was opened for questions, Lim appeared at a disadvantage. The seating arrangement had many MCA members placed in front while the Pakatan supporters were at the back. This probably allowed the MCA supporters to sprint to the question line faster, so most of the questions came from them.

And such was the fervour of the MCA questioners that they came across more like football jabs than civilised audience members. They harangued Lim, scolded him, yelled at him.

Lim did all right in answering the first round of questions, but for the second, he hardly addressed them, thereby giving Chua the fodder to cleverly attack him for not doing so.

Lim should have been better prepared to answer the questions because he seemed to lose some ground after that. Even if the questions were nonsensical or unrelated to the topic, he should have exposed them as such.

To be sure, there were some really stupid questions, like why Lim hadn't abolished the Sungai Nyior toll in Butterworth. Any informed person could have answered, like Lim did, that tolls are controlled by the federal government.

But that didn't stop Chua from bringing it up again later by saying, "If Lim can't abolish the Sungai Nyior toll, how can we believe that he can abolish them at national level?"

Chua probably thought he was speaking to fools in the gallery, but the clever ones in the audience would have realised where the actual fool was standing.

Debate questions from floor
Another foolish display was the outburst by one Jessie Ooi, MCA parliamentary coordinator for Selayang, who accused Lim of ridiculous things. She got a massive bashing from hundreds of netizens afterwards on her own Facebook page. It has since been removed.

Yet for all these, there were two or three questions in the second round that merited attention. At the very least, Lim should have addressed the question concerning what the DAP would do if Pakatan came to power and PAS insisted on implementing hudud.

He could easily have clarified that PAS would then need to get two-thirds majority in order to amend the constitution, and that might be unattainable.

The main event - Najib vs Anwar

Overall, both Chua and Lim showed that they could still do better as debaters, and if they are to do this again - both have agreed for a rematch next month - they need to be more on-the-ball.

Still, Lim managed a good quip when he said, "Chua says the DAP is a puppet of PAS, but to the Malays, Umno says PAS is a puppet of the DAP." And his big boyish smile gave striking contrast to Chua's serious mien.

Chua was pretty sharp at times, but he engaged too much in bashing the opposition. Of the two, Lim came off better in putting across some of the policies of Pakatan, whereas Chua hardly promoted BN's plans. He used the word "transformation" once and just left it at that.

For what it's worth, the debate could be a harbinger of others to come. It was certainly not the first - as there have been debates before between Anwar Ibrahim and Shabery Cheek (right), and Lim and Koh Tsu Koon (both in 2008), and Rafizi Ramli and Khairy Jamaluddin (in London last month) - but it showed that such debates are a healthy feature of a democracy, with political enemies shaking hands afterwards like civilised beings.

Let's hope this is just the curtain-raiser for the main event most of us are looking forward to. That would be the one between Prime Minister Najib Razak and Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Last month, Anwar threw down the gauntlet for a debate on Pakatan's 100-day reforms that Najib had been lambasting in the media. Anwar wants him to argue it out in public, man to man.

Will Najib be man enough to accept the dare? If he does, that would be something to see.

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