

Behind the debates, a game of political chess

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A day after the nation witnessed one of the most significant debates in the country's political history between MCA president Chua Soi Lek and DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng, a clear winner has yet to emerge in the court of public opinion.

The debate, entitled 'Will a two party system lead to a two race system', jointly organised by the Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (Asli) and MCA think tank Institute of Strategic Analysis & Policy Research (Insap), had pitted the two political titans against each other.

However, both Lim and Chua veered off topic, engaging in a political grandstanding session on national television.

The face off resembled a political campaign rather than a debate, and earlier sessions at the 'Malaysian Chinese at Political Crossroads' conference yesterday witnessed both parties attempting to out-manoeuvre each other.

Chua, in his opening speech at the conference had been unforgiving, blasting DAP for its association with PAS, but DAP perhaps anticipating this, was absent from the hall.

DAP had its odds stacked against it on MCA's turf, with its speakers outnumbered by BN speakers at every session until the final face off.

MCA members were present in full force, cheering and jeering at every chance they got.

The majority of DAP's members only arrived shortly before the grand debate scheduled at 5pm, with almost every member clad in yellow, the trademark colour of electoral reform coalition Bersih 2.0.

'No one wins in lousy debate'

At zero hour, Chua opened by immediately accusing DAP of being used by PAS, while Lim deflected by declaring that Pakatan Rakyat parties were only prepared to be used by the people.

However, the debate quickly went off course and descended into a political battle, further fuelled by questions from the floor, mostly from MCA members, where the aggressive nature of some added to the charged atmosphere.

"It was like a ceramah match. I got the impression it was a rather lousy debate," said political analyst Wong Chin Huat, pointing out that the sparring leaders were harping on each other throughout the debate.

If this was an ordinary debate, substance wise, there would be no winner to declare added political commentator Tee Beng Lee.

But the event was more than a debate, if one at all; what played out was instead a game of political chess, he said.

'DAP made strategic gains'

"Lim took advantage of the short time he had to promote DAP's concept on national television as they usually did not have a broadcast platform," said Tee.

Debate Lim Guan Eng
The two debaters had used their usual line of political talk with Chua hammering on DAP over hudud and Lim grilling MCA over its subservience to Umno, he adds.

Concurring, Wong said strategically, DAP was the overall winner in attempting to swing political opinion as the party took advantage of its rare access to television airtime.

However, Wong said MCA too made some gains in projecting its image, as Chua was able to present himself as an articulate leader, a trait seldom seen among other MCA leaders in the party.

Similarly, Lim did not adopt his sometimes aggressive style, and was able to project himself as a calm and composed leader, said Wong.

However, Wong felt that Lim could have been less Chinese-centric.

"When commenting on the Port Klang Free Trade Zone issue, Guan Eng could have asked if all other leaders involved had been arrested, but he asked why MCA was not upset that no Umno leader was arrested.

"Chua was able to easily use this to accuse him of communalism," he said.

'MCA projects new image'

Another political analyst Cheah See Kean said the debate was a positive step for democracy but there was little to judge as both parties strayed off topic.

Debate Chua Soi Lek
"They used this to take advantage and expose themselves to the public rather than trying to debate," he said.

However, in terms of political image, Cheah felt that Chua had the upper hand.

"This is the first time MCA has accepted such a challenge (at the highest level) and it shows something different from MCA," he said.

Cheah added that such debate challenges were already common within DAP and therefore was not a significant added advantage.

On the other hand, Tee felt that in terms of projecting party image, DAP had done a better job.

'Aggressiveness will cost'

Agreeing that Lim had been composed throughout the debate, he pointed out that Chua was very aggressive in attacking his counterpart.

lim guan eng chua soi lek debate question from audience
"The MCA audience was also very aggressive, and this does not sit well with the party's image," he said.

He also blamed the moderator, Tang Ah Chai, for being too soft on the debaters and allowing the debate to descend into a political campaign.

"If they had gone off topic, the moderator could have brought them back to point and pressed them on difficult questions, but he did not."

However, the three analysts agreed that the next debate should be based on hard topics and debated on merits.

"The challenge should be in debating on local government elections, Lynas or even Jalan Sultan," said Wong.

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