

The time has come for more public debates

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Kee Thuan Chye

COMMENT Why don't we have more debates between our politicians, and have these debates telecast live? This is a thought on many minds after the debate between Lim Guan Eng and Dr Chua Soi Lek.

Why not, indeed? After all, people were still talking fervently about the debate the day after - in homes, offices, coffeeshops and social media.

We now have a clear indication that there are two main players in the political field - BN and Pakatan Rakyat - which makes it conducive for a series of debates on a series of national issues to be held between representatives from both sides.

Although some of their politicians are already addressing issues in their own ceramahs, such gatherings are being audited by only a small proportion of the people.

Live telecasts will bring their views to the major populace. And that is something essential for a healthy democracy.

Right now, there is so much spinning going on about both coalitions - not only in the mainstream media but also in blogs and online news websites - that it is often difficult for the public to decide what is the truth.

The best solution to that is to hear the words from the horses' mouths. So let the politicians speak directly to the people. Then the people can gauge from their mannerisms, body language, speech and language what they are all about, and perhaps even whether what they say is believable.

I think we are mature enough as a people for something like this. In fact, I think, going by the buzz before and after the Lim-Chua debate and the keen interest shown on the issues brought up by the speakers, many of us hunger for it.

Equal air time

The question is, whether the government feels secure enough to let such debates go on national television.

For the Lim-Chua debate, Astro was the telecast medium, but Astro programmes reach out only to its subscribers. For something of import like political leaders debating national issues, the proper medium should be TV1 or TV2, the government channels. These reach out to everyone who has a television set.

The time has come for the government to open up this facility to accommodate the opposition as well. This would be in keeping with Prime Minister Najib Razak's promise to make Malaysia "the best democracy in the world".

And as these TV channels are funded by the people's money, the opposition should by right have access to them. But this, sadly, has not been the case. In fact, not only does the government shut out the opposition, it also uses these channels paid for by the people to promote its own propaganda and to paint a negative picture of the opposition through media spin.

It's time to pressure the government to change this attitude.

Bersih 2.0, in its campaign for free and fair elections, demands that all contesting parties and candidates at elections be given free and fair access to the media. This is worthy of support. In fact, it should be

insisted that this “equal air time” rule be implemented not only during election campaigns but at all times.

In a democracy, it should be a natural occurrence for the ruling party as well as the opposition to have equal coverage in the media daily.

But this principle has been hijacked by the ruling coalition and made worse by the fact that its component parties own newspapers and other media outlets. And the mainstream media is controlled as well by the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA).

The time has come for change. If there is no law to forbid political parties from owning media companies, then the Home Ministry should not be allowed to decide who can start a newspaper or radio or television station, as is the case under the PPPA, so that opposition parties can start their own.

The Home Ministry should also not be allowed, as it is also under the PPPA, to suspend or revoke the licence of any media outlet.

Najib vs Anwar debate

But coming back to the issue of public debates and having them telecast live, I think it should particularly be extended to those who aspire to become our prime minister.

Of course, there is no mechanism now that allows the prime minister to be voted for by every citizen, unlike in some other countries. But that doesn't mean we cannot hear from the prospective candidates before the general election.

And since our system is such that the leader of the coalition that wins the majority of the seats in Parliament usually becomes the prime minister, we could have a public debate between the leaders of BN and Pakatan.

They could face the public and address questions on national issues. They could tell us their plans for the country's development. They could show us how sincere and trustworthy they are.

This is what transpire in the US presidential debates that have been held since 1960, and it seems an apt model to follow.

Americans would largely agree that such debates help them get a better idea of the concerns at stake and of the man who could eventually decide the nation's destiny during his term of office.

Indeed, the main target of these debates are voters who have yet to decide whom to vote for and those who are not partisan to any party. As there are many fence-sitters in Malaysia, a debate between the coalition leaders would be a great help.

PM need not be afraid

As many as one-third of the American population have been watching the live telecasts of the debates through the years, which means they generally look forward to these important occasions. It is even noted that the outcomes of a few elections could have been decided by these debates.

The most famous outcome is the one in 1960 in which John F Kennedy contested against Richard Nixon. That was also the first time the presidential debates were held. According to Time magazine, it is “now common knowledge” that without that debate, “Kennedy would never have been president”.

In Malaysia, before the next general election comes about, it would be a great occasion for voters if they could see BN leader Najib Razak engage in a debate with Pakatan leader Anwar Ibrahim.

The challenge to a debate has already been made by Anwar - on the subject of Pakatan's 100-day

reforms if it wins Putrajaya.

This could however be amended to something more in keeping with the next general election. Both leaders could be asked instead to address the urgent problems faced by the nation and the solutions they have to solve them, and also the concrete measures they plan to take to ensure a bright future for every citizen.

Najib need not be afraid of taking up the challenge. After all, his aides have been going around promoting him as a “cool guy”, regardless of whether it’s true. It is Anwar who may have a tougher time because of the sex scandals he’s been tarnished with and his recent gaffe over Israel.

A public debate between the two would really be something. Perhaps they could even battle it out in a series of debates, like the US presidential ones, so that they could cover more ground.

I’m sure that if it happens, Malaysians will stop what they’re doing and watch these two in action. I think it’s something whose time has come, and we will be more than ready for it.

So how about, Najib and Anwar?

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