

**Dr M's contradictory take on debates**  
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COMMENT It is amusing to hear the latest fulminations of the country's eminence grise on all things politic.

Of course Dr Mahathir Mohamad cannot allow such a juicy topic like the need for a debate between Prime Minister Najib Razak and Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim go unremarked.

He has to say something about it but whether he can bring it off without being self-contradictory is in doubt.

His latest comments about the debate and on Anwar are exquisite in the way he appears to gainsay himself in successive sentences.

"There is nothing to debate with Anwar. We already know what his stance is. He is a chameleon, he is everything to everybody, he changes colour every time," Mahathir is reported to have said after a closed-door meeting with Perkasa leaders, an encounter, to be sure, that is not likely to be conducive to ratiocinative thinking.

If one were to employ Mahathir's line to make it favour a debate, the argument could be rendered this way:

"There's all to debate with a person like Anwar. He is a chameleon who changes colour to fit his audience. All you need is a retentive memory to expose him as phony."

Underestimating intelligence of the masses

Mahathir's elaboration of his reasons for not being in favour of a Najib-versus-Anwar debate adds mendacity to the illogic that already mars his brief:

"When he is with the Chinese, he condemns the New Economic Policy; when he is with the Indians, he is an Indian; when he is with the Malays, he gives talks about Islam."

Actually, before Chinese-majority audiences Anwar does not condemn the NEP; he decries the way it is implemented.

NONEWhen he speaks to a largely Indian audience, he rarely neglects to tell them he is Malay and Muslim and that his religion precludes denigration of others.

Holding forth to dominantly Malay crowds, he does go on a bit about Islam but seldom omits emphasising that justice is highly prized by the faith and therefore Muslims must be just in their ways.

The above is a simplification of what Anwar regularly tells the racially varied audiences he meets on the hustings.

If a student interested in the arts of public persuasion were to have followed Anwar on his campaign trail the last few years, he or she would have had enough grist for a learned thesis that could perhaps be entitled 'The Education of the Masses', an echo of Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset's seminal work, 'The Revolt of the Masses'.

Anwar has read the latter work, which has made him wary of what Mahathir is often guilty of - underestimating the intelligence of the masses.

The former prime minister does just that when offering reasons for being opposed to a repeat of last Saturday's debate between MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek and DAP secretary-general and Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng.

Mahathir, in smugly paternalistic vein, argued: "The majority of the people tend to allow sentiments and feelings to influence them, rather than rational thinking."

The problem is that Mahathir does not much care for consistency in what he says; odd, then, he should call Anwar "a chameleon".

Not interested in rational argument

In the febrile prelude to the 1999 general election, Mahathir, having to weather widespread resentment by Malays and others over the abominable treatment he meted out to Anwar, said that unlike Chinese voters, Malays were apt to be influenced by emotion.

Now it appears that the Chinese, including those who follow televised debates, are not exempt from the powerful sway of emotion.

Mahathir archly noted that Umno veterans choose to meet with Perkasa in secret to avoid being stigmatised as racists by those who label the right-wing Malay group as ultras.

Maybe so, but if "the majority of people tend to allow sentiments and feelings to influence them," why hasn't Perkasa found the going easy with its explicit appeal to racial and religious chauvinism?

And why, if Mahathir is to be believed, have Umno veterans to opt for discretion when meeting up with the likes of Ibrahim Ali, except that a residual sense of shame stays the impulse to be open?

The problem is that Mahathir is not interested in rational argument, particularly when he sees his subterranean agenda imperiled by failure to win out in reasoned debate with detractors. In such straits, his aim is to create a subversive perspective in which the line between truth and falsity, fact and fantasy is blurred.

With his Nietzschean will to power and his use of Machiavellian means to secure his ends, he is not easy to sort out.

But the country is near its long march to a phase of liberation from the convolutions of race and religion of the past three decades, thanks to light and leadership of someone who did contribute somewhat to the confusion but has expiated for that fault by his suffering which now could pave the way for a new dispensation.

What his critics denounce as chameleon-like others view as nationally salvific; would that they constitute a majority when balloting begins.

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