

Soi Lek vs Guan Eng: Debate or debacle?

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The 'debate' was billed as the finale of a full-day forum titled 'Malaysian Chinese at the Political Crossroads', which began with a keynote address by Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and included well known DAP, Gerakan, MCA and SUPP leaders. They spoke on Chinese education and challenges facing the Chinese.

For the finale, the 'debaters' were supposed to speak on the proposition 'The two party system is becoming a two race system'. Clearly it wasn't a debate, because it wasn't clear who was to propose and who was to oppose.

Apparently we are to read 'alliance' when we see 'party,' since the competition to form the next federal government is really between Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat, two alliances, each comprised of race-based and multi-racial parties.

So, it's unclear why both the 'debaters' were Chinese, why the 'debate' was in Chinese, and why the number 'two' was included in the proposition, twice. As one 'debater' (Lim Guan Eng) pointed out, the debate should really have been between the leaders of Barisan and Pakatan.

The 'debaters' were Chua Soi Lek, leader of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and key performer in a famous video featuring extra-marital sex; and Lim Guan Eng, who has been on the wrong side of prison due to selective prosecution by Umno-BN, and now leads the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the government of Penang state.

Chua and Lim said they agreed beforehand that they would 'debate professionally', and not attempt to 'win'. As you may have deduced by now, I put 'debate' in quotes because a debate is supposed to be made up of speeches for and against a proposition, to enable the audience to decide who 'wins'. This was not a debate.

I have zero command of Chinese, so all I know of the 'debate' is what I have read in English news reports. I make no apology for this piece, for a person in an elected office is a servant of all Malaysians, not just of one race.

The luck of the draw resulted in Chua being first to speak. Chua therefore set the tone of the debate. Like all politicians, Chua danced around the topic, though he does seem to have made it explicit that Umno is the dominant partner in its relationship with MCA: Chua said it's unrealistic for Malaysians to expect that a non-bumiputera can lead any state government other than Penang.

Also, the 'debate' provided more fuel for the misconception that DAP is a Chinese party. What is it about Karpal Singh or Tunku Abdul Aziz that makes people think they are Chinese?

From Chua, I got a strong sense of the bankruptcy of the MCA. He thinks we want (1) Prosperity: high income for all; (2) A non-Islamic state: minimising the risk of hudud implementation; (3) Zero street demonstrations: assuring the nation we have equal access to justice (Chua must've been sleeping during the Altantunya, Ambiga, Anwar, Datuk T, EO6, Lingam and PKFZ events); (4) To accept Umno's primacy: Chua says non-Malays can't lead, except in Penang.

Chua is clearly delusional: it is Umno-BN that won't approve non-Muslim building projects, but is generous towards Muslim projects. It is Mahathir Mohamad, demigod of Umno-BN, who claimed Malaysia is an Islamic state. It is Umno-BN that is riddled with corruption, the number one issue in Malaysia. It is Pakatan Rakyat who say it's okay for Christians to continue calling God Allah, consistent with practices in the Middle Eastern Muslim heartlands and in Indonesia.

Lim focused on (1) Corruption: how transparency in Penang has resulted in state income being sufficient to fund state expenditure; (2) Accountability of leaders: DAP office-bearers have declared their assets; (3) Malay supremacy: the astonishing fact that only MCA leaders have been 'nabbed' in relation to PKFZ, and even a former MCA leader saying MCA only got Umno's breadcrumbs; (4) Justice: through a veiled reference to the MACC/Teoh Beng Hock debacle.

Lim is more in touch with the aspirations of Malaysians. However, I was disappointed, for I expected Lim to be more multi-racial. I expected him to challenge his audience - whether DAP or MCA supporters - to think more like Malaysians. I expected Lim to act more like a great leader, not just like Chua.

I consider this the best description of a great leader: "A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be." [Rosalynn Carter]

I didn't see much evidence of that kind of leadership in Lim. I am disappointed.

Mostly, I'm disappointed because they still won't grab the bull by the horns and wrestle with it. Our problem is race-based politics, race-based education, race-based benefits. Who will prod and drag us through these crossroads?

Do we have a two race system: constitutionally defined Malays and birth-document defined Chinese? If we do, is it because we don't have mixed-race groups where politicians can drum up support?

What about electoral constituencies which give more weight to some races? What about the hurdles in the way of those who marry across races? What about our much-meddled-with education system - and Biro Tata Negara - which have created a society which looks at everything through racial lenses? What about the fact that we still have to fill in 'race' in most private and public sector forms?

It wasn't debate. It was a debacle. It wasn't a finale. It was an anticlimax.

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