

The Great Debate's political impact - one week later
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COMMENT One week after the debate between MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek and DAP secretary-general and Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng, after the passions have cooled down and the arguments digested, what is the likely political impact, if any, moving forward?

What most Malaysians may not have realised is the one cardinal rule associated with political debates - "Don't Screw Up". Most of the members of audience would not remember the substantive points made by politicians on salient issues during these debates but almost all of them would remember if any political gaffes were made.

For Richard Nixon, it was not so much something he said but rather his body language - nervous, withdrawn and sweating profusely - that made his younger, confident and more relaxed opponent, John F Kennedy, look more appealing in their first 1960 presidential debate.

More recently, during a debate featuring aspiring Republican presidential candidates, Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, infamously uttered "oops" when he could not remember the name of the third federal agency he had promised he would abolish. In other words, impressions of the debate matter more than the actual substance of the debate.

Undoubtedly, the lasting impression and the most significant political gaffe made from this debate did not involve either of the political leaders but came from a member of the audience who posed a question/made a statement directed towards Lim.

Jessie Ooi, an MCA member and 'caretaker' of the Selayang parliamentary area, accused the Penang chief minister of putting additional burdens on the people by raising the assessment rates and by towing cars parked illegally after 10.30pm, even though the streets were empty at that time. I suspect that neither Ms Ooi nor the two political leaders realised that the 38 seconds used to pose that question would make her an Internet sensation almost overnight.

One week after the debate, she remains a widely debated topic, especially among the Chinese community. Judging from the over 40,000 comments which have been posted on her Facebook fan page and the many thousands of other mostly negative comments in the rest of cyberspace - Twitter, YouTube, blogs, news items - she has sparked a greater backlash than when Ibrahim Ali handed out white packets to senior citizens during a Perkasa Chinese New Year event.

Her accidental rise to infamy has, to a large extent, taken some of the positive attention that Chua may have received as a result of him daring to go face-to-face against the DAP's secretary-general and Penang chief minister. More worrying for the MCA is the very real possibility that the massive outpouring of anger/scorn/derision targeted at Ms Ooi could translate into a further loss of support by the MCA among the Chinese community.

'Cheap shot' at Tee Keat

The second likely lasting impression from the debate is Chua's 'cheap shot' at former MCA president Ong Tee Keat. When responding to Lim's reference to Ong's admission to a US embassy official that the Chinese community in Malaysia had the perception that they were just getting 'crumbs' from the government, Chua seemed to take great pride in declaring that MCA had gotten rid of this non-performing leader after less than a year in office.

Not surprisingly, this prompted an immediate response from Ong who tweeted 'But I wonder if he (referring to Chua) is not rottened, why MCA has got such a nosedive support' (sic).

There was no question that Chua was intent on going all out to attack the DAP, especially with regard to its relationship with PAS.

While he raised some salient points, such as the lack of a comprehensive governing agenda on the part of Pakatan, his 'swipe' against Ong probably left a deeper impression than his attacks on the DAP.

By doing so, he allowed himself to be thought of as a vindictive and sarcastic person rather than someone who was raising relevant issues for public consideration. This move by Chua, coupled with the aggressive questions posed and statements made against Lim by the various MCA supporters and leaders from the floor, left the impression that MCA was more interested in making personal attacks than to debate and discuss policy issues.

Lim's usual strategy of promoting the policies and accomplishments of the Penang state government probably exacerbated this perception.

The third likely impact may not get fully played out on the national stage until a later time. Chua has been doggedly trying to use the issue of Islam, the Islamic state and PAS to attack the DAP. But often, much of what he has said can and has been interpreted as insulting or belittling Islam. For example, he used arguments from a book - 'Malaysia and the Club of Doom' - to equate Islam with all sorts of negative indicators such as corruption and low literacy

In the Tenang by-election, he infamously criticised the PAS candidate for not wanting to shake hands with men during the campaign. In this debate, many Malays who were tuning into Astro Awani got a chance to listen to Chua's non-stop attacks against DAP for being powerless against PAS to establish an Islamic state or to implement more Islamic leaning policies such as the banning of cinemas and not finding new locations for pork abattoirs.

Here, Chua is stepping on thin ice since he may end up losing more Malay support for the MCA than the little support he can gain from the Chinese community, given the relative lack of salience on this issue.

Potential backlash

If his statements regarding Islam in this debate, together with some of his statements made in other context, gain a wider audience among the Malays, the potential backlash against the MCA could be significant enough to cause MCA to lose a few more parliamentary and state seats.

This is not to say that Lim gave a stellar performance and that Chua had a dismal outing. Both achieved most of their stated objectives. Lim did not want to just discuss issues of interest to the Chinese community but went beyond by bringing in corruption, economic management and his record in Penang. Chua wanted to show that he could go toe-to-toe with Lim and take him on in areas of supposed vulnerability such as hudud and PAS' intention to set up an Islamic state.

Both also had some shortcomings. Lim failed to draw attention to some of the successes of other Pakatan states especially Selangor.

And he let slip the opportunity to re-emphasise DAP's firm commitment against the implementation of hudud and the establishment of an Islamic state. Chua failed to bring up the prime minister's name even once and no mention was made of any of Najib Abdul Razak's transformation policies.

But these points have probably been forgotten by the public, including those who witnessed the debate live on TV or as a member of the audience. What counts are the lasting impressions from this debate and from this perspective, the negatives are much more apparent for the MCA than for the DAP.

Finally, if the next debate between these two leaders in English / BM, takes place as originally promised, it would ramp up pressure on Najib to have a much more politically significant debate with opposition

leader Anwar Ibrahim. If this debate were to take place, the same cardinal rule would apply - "Don't Screw Up!" In the meantime, all of us political junkies will be waiting expectantly.

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