

## **Anwar turns the tables on Najib in debate upmanship**

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**By Terence Netto**

COMMENT Slowly but steadily, the immediate prelude to the general election has become a game of one-upmanship, at least on the question of debates between the competing coalitions' principals.

After MCA's Dr Chua Soi Lek and DAP's Lim Guan Eng faced each other a few weeks ago, public expectations rose for a similar duel between the head honchos of BN and Pakatan Rakyat.

But Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak appeared distinctly cool towards the idea of a televised bout with Pakatan's Anwar Ibrahim who has been baiting the BN chief on the issue for some time.

Anwar's strategy was to portray the PM as afraid to face him while Najib relied on pooh-poohing the usefulness of a debate in determining who had the better feel for the issues of the day.

When public interest in the Soi Lek versus Guan Eng debate mounted in a way reminiscent of the pre-fight ballyhoo surrounding televised boxing matches between famous fighters in the past, Guan Eng shrewdly ratcheted up the pressure by letting on early in his duel with Soi Lek that the more fitting debate would have to be Najib versus Anwar.

NONETHis had the effect of heightening public desire for a televised joust between the two leaders.

Anwar, tongue-in-cheek, suggested that he was even prepared to debate Najib on a format that would allow the latter double the time on his speaking slots. Unflattering though that was to his intended opponent, it had the effect of suggesting that Anwar was prepared to go the extra mile to debate Najib.

Things got tricky when Wikileaks founder Julian Assange invited Anwar to be interviewed on Skype, which the Pakatan supremo accepted only to find that maverick blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin (RPK), without Anwar being apprised, was included in the arrangement.

Anwar declined to take part upon hearing that RPK would be in on the conversation, prompting the trigger-happy RPK to tag Anwar "chicken".

Will Najib accept challenge?

Najib and his deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin, found things too tempting for them and stuck their fingers in the trough. Each was unable to resist deriding Anwar for supposedly ducking out of a debate with RPK.

In the interim, Najib proceeded to hold forth before the Foreign Correspondents Club in Kuala Lumpur, which had invited him to address them, in a way that suggested the goings-on in the election primaries in the US was very much on his radar.

By referencing the Republican primaries, though omitting to mention its plethora of debates, the PM had ignored a streetwise adage, "Never give a sucker a fair chance."

In the latest twist to the ongoing exchanges, Anwar has said that Assange would be ready to host a debate where the opposition leader was prepared to take on RPK and Najib at one go.

In this game of one-upmanship, Anwar has come out with the edge where a while ago, the debate-keen leader had seemed like he was weaseling out.

For Najib to refuse to debate Anwar now would reflect badly on his credit, after having left hostages to

fortune by beating up on Anwar for declining to debate RPK and by blithely alluding to the Republican primaries in the US whose central datum was the willingness of its participants to debate each other.

If fear of being outperformed by Anwar was behind Najib's reluctance to debate his nemesis, then discretion merited that he avoid comment on Anwar's seeming refusal to cross swords with RPK.

Now it is a case of you can't have your cake and eat it too for the BN master.

Najib has to accept Anwar's latest gambit of wanting to debate both RPK and Najib at the same time. Otherwise he would invite the epithet "chicken" his erstwhile ally RPK hurled at Anwar.

Alas for Najib, on the issue of debating Anwar, what goes round comes round.

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