

Najib's no-show at manifesto debate hardly raises a ripple

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Despite being invited, BN chairperson Najib Abdul Razak as expected did not show up at a manifesto debate and forum organised by electoral watchdog Bersih at the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall yesterday.

Bersih had invited Najib and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim (seated on right) to the event ahead of GE13, but Najib did not respond, nor did he send a representative to outline the BN manifesto's contents.

This left the floor completely open to Anwar, who summarised his coalition's manifesto and took a few questions from moderator Dr Farouk Musa, before leaving to attend to another speaking engagement.

PKR's director of strategy Rafizi Ramli, one of the key policy makers in the Pakatan manifesto, then took over for Anwar, fielding Farouk's questions and making comparisons between BN and Pakatan's manifestos.

Najib's absence was not missed, as shown by the enthusiasm of the 3,000 people packed in the hall, with many camped outside watching the forum from a live feed screen.

They gave rapturous welcome and send-off for Anwar during his brief appearance, and stayed back to listen to Rafizi going into the details of the Pakatan manifesto in the two-hour-long forum.

The organisers occasionally played videos of speeches delivered by Najib at the launch of the BN manifesto on April 6, and slides that highlighted the major talking points of the BN manifesto, side-by-side with the Pakatan manifesto.

Bersih had earlier announced a "surprise" in store for the audience should Najib not turn up at the event, but apart from the Rafizi back-up act for Anwar, there was none.

That did not seem to matter to the crowd, which booed at visuals of Najib's speeches and applauded Anwar when he scored points.

Anwar stressed when summarising the Pakatan manifesto that he would not apologise for his "populist" policies.

"What is wrong in being populist? Populist means coming up with pro-rakyat policies," he said.

Being populist, Anwar added, would only become a problem if the rakyat is fed with unrealistic promises through rhetoric.

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