

**The great fumbling to save Najib's face**  
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COMMENT As the dust settles on yesterday's highly anticipated showdown between the ex-premier and the current one, the official line has been that Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak could not turn up for "security reasons".

Even if the clash of words did not materialise, which instead fizzled into a truncated monologue by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, those who were at PWTC yesterday morning would agree there were grounds for concern.

The situation did turn chaotic at the forum titled 'Nothing to Hide: PM's Dialogue with NGOs'. Journalists were shoved against the wall and tables, with some even losing their shoes, from all the pushing in the overflowing hall.

The 2,000-strong crowd was angry too; they shouted and drowned out the emcee. But despite the jostling for space, the apparent chaos only came about after the emcee announced the police decision to cancel the event.

When Mahathir took advantage of Najib's no-show to make his grand entrance into the hall with his supporters, the situation became even more chaotic, as the crowd cheered wildly.

Police and security personnel then swung into the action and entered the hall, turning the din in the overcrowded venue into a pandemonium.

**Cancelled even before scuffle**

But how exactly the emcee's announcement could threaten 'harmony' is unclear.

"We understand that the security authorities have met with the organiser and informed them about a scuffle outside the hall. An arrest was also made to identify who had (planned to) sabotage this programme," said the emcee at around 10.20am.

"Therefore, the organiser has been forced to cancel the event."

Inspector-general of police Khalid Abu Bakar, in a Twitter posting, had said the cancellation was on the grounds of "public order" and to "maintain harmony".

Strangely, the police chief had instructed the event's cancellation even before the scuffle happened. Khalid's tweet was at 8.53am but the commotion, which was witnessed by a Malaysiakini journalist, happened at 9.35am.

Two men had quarrelled outside the hall and a PWTC security personnel and Rela officer were seen grabbing the arms of one of the men and escorted him away.

## **Damage control**

How a scuffle between two men could threaten such a high-profile event almost an hour after it happened remains a mystery.

Ultimately, Najib's public relations team needs to come up with a convincing reason for his no-show, which has unwittingly turned into a public relations disaster.

The event was carefully prepped for the premier to show he had nothing to hide, but safe enough to insulate him from any bad press by barring the media from attending the dialogue after his arrival.

The event was organised by Umno-linked Malaysian Volunteer Lawyers Association (Sukaguan), whose chairperson Khairul Anwar Rahmat is Johor Umno Youth deputy chief.

Those in attendance also told Malaysiakini - on condition of anonymity - that the government's propaganda wing, the Special Affairs Department (Jasa), had sent out invitations for the event to them.

But Najib's failure to turn up, allowing Mahathir - who was meant to be only one among 2,000 guests - to take over the podium and give an anti-Najib speech, does not bode well for the prime minister.

And the police's move to stop Mahathir from speaking likely did more damage than good, neither did it lend credence to police claim of security concerns for Najib.

The organiser, which initially welcomed Mahathir and even photographed a seat reserved for the former premier and posted it on social media, later made a U-turn and claimed Mahathir was never invited.

For now, the official line from the Prime Minister Office's is to blame the police, stating that Najib had to abide by Khalid's instructions.

The damage is done. How well Najib's team can mitigate the blow will depend on how convinced the public is that the prime minister has indeed nothing to hide.

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