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# Shabery stands his ground against Anwar

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** Pitted against the orator Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Datuk Ahmad Shabery Cheek was always going to be the underdog.

But the information minister stood his ground and scored points against the Parti Keadilan Rakyat de facto leader in a first-of-its-kind televised debate on the fuel price increase here last night.

After Anwar had said he would lower the price of fuel by 50 sen if his party formed the government, Shabery questioned why he was backtracking on his election campaign promise to lower the fuel price from the RM1.92 for petrol (before the recent hike).

He accused Anwar of taking the populist route by now saying he would reduce fuel prices by 50 sen instead of explaining his pre-election promise of how, if his coalition took control of the government, he could maintain the RM1.92 per litre fuel price.

Shabery also cited Venezuela and Iran as examples where the prices of fuel were kept at artificially low prices. The two major oil exporting countries were paying for this by suffering high inflation

rates.

"Malaysia is enjoying a low inflation rate despite the recent price hike," Shabery said, to applause from the crowd.

"Venezuela keeps its fuel price very low at 10, 15 sen. It is now facing a 30 per cent inflation rate. Iran also keeps its price low... it now has the eighth worst inflation rate in the world."

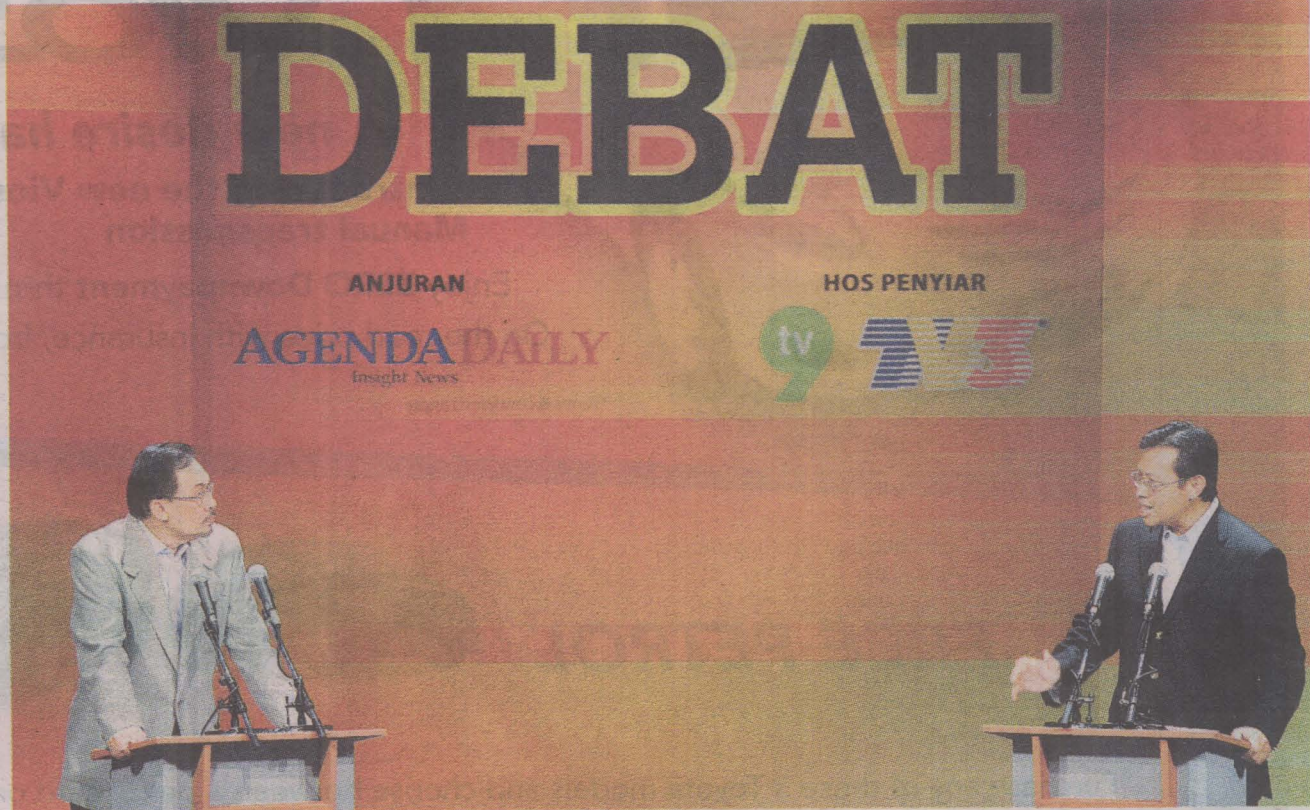
Shabery said the subsidy could not be sustained as it would affect economic growth in the long run.

"If we continue giving subsidies, oil giants like ExxonMobil and Shell will benefit from the people's money. Why don't we directly channel the money to the people?"

On Anwar's claim that the price of fuel could not be kept low in Malaysia because of mismanagement and corruption, Shabery countered by pointing to Norway (also an oil producer) and Finland, which have low corruption, but did not give subsidies to its people and the countries continued to thrive.

Anwar said his proposed 50 sen reduction in fuel price would cost RM5 billion.

He called for Tenaga Na-



Parti Keadilan Rakyat de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim (left) and Information Minister Datuk Ahmad Shabery Cheek during their televised debate on the fuel price increase in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

sional Bhd to reduce its excess standby capacity from the current 40 per cent to 20 per cent, suggesting a reduction in the purchase from independent power producers (IPPs).

This, he said, would save RM2 billion.

Shabery countered that the IPP deals were signed during Anwar's tenure as finance minister.

The information minister also warned that if the government maintained fuel pump prices at the RM1.90 range

that Anwar had promised, the fuel subsidies would total more than RM50 billion.

"This could hamper development programmes for the people."

Shabery also cautioned against thinking that Malaysia's oil reserves would last forever.

"By 2015, we will become a net importer and within a few more years we could start to run out of oil."

The minister also reminded the audience of Anwar's histo-

ry of going against the previous prime ministers who were behind Petronas' growth.

"You went against Tun Abdul Razak, who started in a cordial manner with Anwar and Shabery exchanging warm handshakes and smiles before and after the event.

"Pak Lah (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) didn't take more than he should from Petronas, yet you are against him."

The debate titled "Form the government today, lower the

fuel price tomorrow" was moderated by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) chairman and NST columnist Datuk Johan Jaaffar. It was conducted in a cordial manner with Anwar and Shabery exchanging warm handshakes and smiles before and after the event.

The audience was also well behaved, with the only report of a problem outside the DBP hall. Three photographers claimed they were manhandled by security guards and later lodged police reports.