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A good debate, say Shabery and Anwar

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KUALA LUMPUR: Information Minister Datuk Shabery Cheek and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim took on each other in a debate on the fuel price increases last night and afterwards proclaimed that it had been a good clash of words.

After the hour-long debate, based on the opposition party's election pledge "Today we form the government, tomorrow we reduce fuel prices," Shabery said he left it to the leadership to evaluate his performance.

Anwar said it was not a matter of winning or losing but the debate was a "good forum and healthy discourse towards addressing the propaganda against the PKR".

The debate, telecast live over Bernama TV, TV9 and Astro Awani, was held at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka before 200 guests made up of political party members and the media.

The event was moderated by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka chairman Johan Jaafar and two other panellists - current affairs weekly *Siasah* editor Zulkifli Sulong and Universiti Utara Malaysia vice-chancellor Nordin Kardi.

Anwar, in his opening remarks, said that if the Pakatan Rakyat were to form the government tomorrow it would bring down the petrol price by 50 sen a litre. He mentioned various measures, including reducing the standby capacity of Tenaga Nasional Berhad from the current 40% to 20%, to find the funds.

He said the subsidy to the Independent

Power Producers (IPPs) has caused national oil company Petronas and Tenaga losses.

Shabery on the other hand reiterated the government's stand by reiterating earlier arguments that the government needed to reduce the subsidies for petrol which were being enjoyed by the rich and their big cars, instead of being channelled to development projects for the poor.

He also said that the subsidies would benefit foreign oil companies based in Malaysia instead of Malaysians.

Shabery said that countries like Venezuela and Iran which had low oil prices had high inflation rates and added that some countries like Norway had succeeded in building strong economies despite high oil prices. He also accused Anwar of taking advantage of the hardship of people for his own interest now and during his student days in the 1970's.

Shabery also took potshots at Anwar accusing him of supporting the very policies on the IPPs that he is opposing now when he (Anwar) was deputy prime minister.

He also said that Anwar was for the International Monetary Funds (IMFs) measures to be implemented in the country during the last financial crisis in 1998.

Anwar responded saying that one cannot compare Norway to Malaysia as that country's per capita income was 10 times that of Malaysia's.

He said while Iran and Venezuela had high inflation rates but low petrol prices, Malaysians have to put up with high inflation rate and high oil prices.

He said instead of using the subsidy savings to bail out ailing companies and

provide incentives for large companies to come to the countries, it should be used for the poor.

He added that this lack of proper management had caused a lot of leakages to the government funds.

Anwar also said that the accusation that he supported detrimental IMF measures for the economy during the 1998 financial crisis was a slander that had been propagated over the years.

"And I am willing to debate on this with world economists," he said.

In closing, Anwar said something had to be done soon or the economy would bleed severely and that Pakatan Rakyat will continue to push for more measures to revive the economy.

Shabery said that the government was not into populist sentiments and was looking at the long-term effects of the rising oil prices to the economy.

Meanwhile, a ruckus broke out outside the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) when four press photographers were assaulted by DBP security personnel.

The cameramen from *theSun*, *Berita Harian*, *Channel News Asia* and *FinancialDaily* were assaulted by the men as they were trying to leave the press area upstairs of the hall to go to the lobby to get pictures of both Shabery and Anwar.

They were prevented from leaving by the personnel who held them back.

When they resisted, they were kicked.

The media were later allowed to go downstairs and police took control of the situation by asking everyone to disperse from the DBP grounds.

The pressmen lodged a report at the Dang Wangi district police headquarters later last night.