

Debate winner irrelevant to sway support for GE13
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ANALYSIS, Feb 19 — In the matter of Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek against Lim Guan Eng, the key question may not be who won yesterday's debate but whether it will make a difference to how Malaysians will vote in the next general elections.

And the answer is probably no.

In the words of Lim, who said at the beginning of the debate "I feel that what all Malaysians really want to see is not the two of us debating but the Prime Minister and (Datuk Seri) Anwar (Ibrahim)." But it is unlikely that Datuk Seri Najib Razak and the opposition leader will ever debate before elections are called.

Both Lim and Dr Chua spent their televised debate offering viewers a glimpse of what they have already seen and heard before.

From Dr Chua, his message was that DAP was a tool for PAS to impose Islamic law, and that Lim was an arrogant, young leader.

And Lim's target was clearly Umno and the laundry list of corruption scandals that has become fodder for the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

But will Malaysians — particularly the minority Chinese Malaysian voters who understood yesterday's Chinese-language debate — decide who they will vote for after watching yesterday's debate?

The question is probably moot because chances are most voters have already made up their minds.

Depending on their political preferences, yesterday's debate would only seek to reinforce their views about whether Barisan Nasional (BN) or Pakatan Rakyat (PR) would offer them a better deal.

On that score the DAP probably gained the most from yesterday's debate.

While Dr Chua did better than expected in the debate, Lim got a national platform to reinforce the message of why many Chinese Malaysian voters abandoned their support for BN in 2008 and will likely continue to do so.

Among the issues Lim managed to score points on yesterday was on the Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) as well as the National Feedlot Centre (NFC) scandals.

Dr Chua should, however, get credit for persistently peddling the message that backing the DAP would open the door to more Islamic policies under PAS.

But MCA strategists will have to also ask themselves if this issue is really gaining traction among Chinese voters.

The unhappiness among non-Malay voters with race and religious controversies have centred on Umno and BN policies.

And many MCA leaders have privately acknowledged the point that Chinese Malaysian voters are ultimately unhappy with Umno, not PAS.

Fact is PAS has become increasingly irrelevant to how someone from the Chinese and non-Malay communities vote.

Umno, because it is seen as party in power and because of the number of scandals associated with it, has become the focus of not just the Chinese but all Malaysians.

So yesterday's debate was important only for the cheerleaders from both the DAP and PAS, as well as the entertainment value it offered political pundits and watchers.

As soon as yesterday's debate ended, operatives from the DAP and MCA immediately took to Twitter, Facebook and their Blackberries, iPhones and Androids to push through the message that their man won.

Unfortunately it is irrelevant who won the debate if indeed there was a way of measuring who did better.

Ultimately the real question all Malaysians — and not just the Chinese community — will face when it comes to the next general elections is whether they are better off that they were in 2008.

And yesterday's debate is irrelevant to that question.

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