

Malay professionals want Najib-Anwar debate, says Merdeka Center
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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 24 — Many Malay professionals would like to see Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak debate Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim on policy issues, the Merdeka Center said today.

The independent pollster told Sinar Harian its focus group discussions with Malay professionals showed they were keen on a debate where both leaders talked about larger issues affecting the country, not personal ones.

“There appears to be a change in what the people want. They want a new culture of debate rather than smear campaigns,” Merdeka Center director Ibrahim Suffian (picture) told the Malay-language daily.

The centre’s findings come just 10 days after Anwar challenged Najib to a public debate over national policies during his winding-up speech at the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) convention in Alor Star.

The PKR de facto leader had said that an open debate would let voters decide for themselves if the opposition pact’s plans for Malaysia had merit.

The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition has criticised PR’s alternative policies as populist and irresponsible.

It was the third such challenge issued by Anwar to Najib, who has so far declined to go toe-to-toe with the former deputy prime minister.

Najib, who is Umno president, previously demurred by saying that political parties were more important than individuals in Malaysia’s parliamentary democracy.

However, he also stressed that he would not baulk if required to face off against the charismatic Anwar in a presidential-style debate.

“I’m not afraid of Anwar Ibrahim,” Najib had said to loud cheers from delegates at the close of the Selangor BN convention in September last year.

A survey commissioned by PKR in August last year showed that Najib was more popular than Anwar especially among Malays despite being seen as indecisive and a poorer communicator.

The poll noted, however, that Anwar could combat Najib’s “surface appeal” by leveraging on his image as a strong, decisive leader with good communication skills and an understanding of economic issues.

The prime minister was seen positively by 53 per cent of voters compared to 40 per cent who backed Anwar.

Najib was also the overwhelming favourite among the Malays, with 71 per cent backing the Umno president compared to just 32 per cent who viewed Anwar favourably.

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