

Anwar wants debate with Najib after trading blows on economic policies
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DENGKIL, Jan 28 — Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim again challenged Datuk Seri Najib Razak to a debate after both rivals had lashed out at each other's economic policies yesterday.

Opposition Leader Anwar had said in an interview with the Wall Street Journal the prime minister's policies benefited cronies despite embarking on an economic reform programme.

But Najib returned fire in the evening, saying the opposition's promises of abolishing tolled roads, writing off study loans and reducing fuel prices were "a recipe for economic disaster" as the government would have to absorb RM40 billion in study loans alone.

Anwar (picture) issued at least his fourth challenge to the Umno president in front of over 1,000 who attended a ceramah here last night despite Najib so far declining to go head-to-head with the former finance minister.

"Najib said our policies will destroy the country. So I say, let's have a dialogue. He can speak for 20 minutes, I will speak for 10. He can reply for 20 minutes, and then I will reply in 10.

"He said he is not afraid of Anwar but afraid he will give me a fever. But I will use the space (in a debate) with respect," the PKR de facto leader said.

BN chief Najib has previously demurred by saying that political parties were more important than individuals in Malaysia's parliamentary democracy.

Anwar's call for an open debate has so far been answered only once — in July 2008 — by then-Information Minister Datuk Ahmad Shabeery Cheek, an event broadcast live on national television.

Independent pollsters Merdeka Center revealed earlier this week that focus group discussions showed that most Malay professionals would like to see the two go toe-to-toe on policy issues.

"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 had said.

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.

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