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NEW YORK: Democratic presidential candidates Sen Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton speak during the CNN Democratic Presidential Primary Debate at the Brooklyn Navy Yard on Thursday. — AP

ROWDY NIGHT OF CAMPAIGNING IN NY CLINTON, SANDERS JOUST IN BROOKLYN BRAWL

NEW YORK: Democrats brawled in Brooklyn while Republicans in black tie threw sharp elbows at a Manhattan gala in a rowdy New York night of politics ahead of the state's Tuesday presidential primary. As protests raged outside a state GOP dinner, Republican frontrunner Donald Trump delivered an impassioned defense of the city he calls home. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, meanwhile, aggressively challenged each other's judgment to be president at a raucous Democratic debate over Wall Street banks, minimum wage, gun control and foreign policy.

The Democratic fight Thursday night came at a pivotal moment in the party's primary campaign, with Clinton leading in the delegate count but Sanders generating huge enthusiasm for his surprising candidacy. The debate also left no doubt that a rivalry that once centered on wonkish policy disagreements has turned strikingly personal.

The Vermont senator took a biting and often sarcastic tone as he sought to chip away at Clinton's credibility on issue after issue. He went as far as to suggest that her labeling of certain criminals as "superpredators" when she was first lady was "a racist term and everybody knew it was a racist term."

The tone among Republicans was somewhat more subdued. Trump praised the city's response to the nation's deadliest terrorist attacks in remarks designed to jab rival Ted Cruz, a Texas senator who has repeatedly condemned "New York values" in his push to defeat the New York real estate mogul. "In our darkest moments, as a city we showed the world the very, very best in terms of bravery, heart and soul of America," Trump charged.

"These are the values we need to make America great again."

On the sidewalks outside, Trump was the target of rowdy protesters who hung an effigy of the billionaire businessman and chanted, "How do you spell racist? T-R-U-M-P." The scene came shortly after Florida prosecutors dismissed a criminal complaint against Trump's campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, two weeks after local police charged him with grabbing a reporter. Florida state attorney Dave Aronberg declared police were right to charge Lewandowski with misdemeanor battery, but said the burden on prosecutors to prove the case turned out to be weightier.

The Democratic debate was the first for Clinton and Sanders in five weeks, and a lively crowd cheered their candidates loudly and occasionally booed their foes. At one point Clinton said with a smile, "I love Brooklyn". For Clinton, a win in a state that twice elected her senator would blunt Sanders' recent momentum and put his pursuit of the nomination further behind. A Sanders upset over Clinton would shake up the race, raising fresh concerns about her candidacy and breathing new life into the Vermont senator's campaign.

The Democratic primary has been fought for months on familiar terrain. Clinton has cast Sanders' proposals for breaking up banks and offering free tuition at public colleges and universities as unrealistic. Sanders has accused Clinton of being part of a rigged economic and political system, hammering her repeatedly for giving paid speeches to Wall Street banks and refusing to release the transcripts.

Clinton continued to struggle to explain why she has not released the transcripts, saying only that she'll do so when other candidates are required to do the same. She tried to raise questions about Sanders' own openness by noting that he has yet to release his income tax information. The senator pledged to release his most recent tax returns yesterday, and said there would be "no big money from speeches, no major investments" in the disclosures.

The candidates also sparred over raising the federal minimum wage, with Sanders expressing surprise as Clinton voiced support for efforts to set the hourly pay rate at \$15, the level he has long backed. "The secretary has confused a lot of people. I don't know how you're there for the fight for \$15 when you say you want a \$12-an-hour national minimum wage," he said. Clinton clarified that while she does support a \$12-per-hour federal minimum wage, she would sign legislation raising that level to \$15.

Sanders, whose campaign has focused squarely on economic issues, showed more fluency on foreign policy than in previous debates, particularly during an extended exchange on the intractable conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. He urged the US to be "even-handed" in dealing with both sides and said Washington must acknowledge that Israel isn't right all of the time. Clinton highlighted her involvement with Mideast peace efforts as President Barack Obama's secretary of state, saying pointedly, "Describing the problem is a lot easier than trying to solve it." — AP