

Fine orator who nearly got to the top

44/45

53.9.98

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THE place was the posh Desaru View Hotel's convention centre in Kota Tinggi. The date was Oct 24, 1993. And the man of the hour was Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The hall erupted with cheers as Anwar entered. It took the Finance Minister nearly 30 minutes to make his way to the stage as nearly everybody who was somebody in Umno was there to congratulate the 46-year-old man who had a day earlier made Umno history.

Just over 10 years after joining Umno in 1982, Anwar had, in a few deft moves, forced incumbent and veteran Umno leader Ghafar Baba to give up the second most powerful office in Umno and the country.

Ghafar only secured seven divisional nominations while Anwar sailed through with 145.

It was a humiliating exit for Ghafar.

Anwar was only one rung away from the ultimate position of power in the country, held by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad since 1981.

It was Dr Mahathir who had defied critics and tradition to bring in Anwar, a perceived anti-establishment youth leader, into the party in 1982.

Anwar had been head of Abim, an Islamic youth movement that had become, under his leadership, a vocal champion of civil liberties, human rights and a fiery critic of government corruption.

Abim had captured the imagination of Malaysian youth and Anwar's entry into Umno paved the way for the Barisan Nasional's convincing victory in the 1982 general election.

From then on, their relationship had evolved from mentor-pupil to father-son and staunch political allies.

Anwar stood by Dr Ma-

hathir in facing the Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah-Datuk Musa Hitam challenge in 1987, before gradually turning into a deputy who could not quite see eye-to-eye with the party leader.

The economic slowdown that hit the country last July provided the backdrop for the final falling out.

At the June Umno general assembly one of the final acts was played out.

Anwar was widely believed to be behind the issue of cronyism and nepotism, raised by Umno Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi at the assembly.

Dr Mahathir countered by releasing lists of "cronies" who had benefitted from the Government's privatised projects and contracts.

Among the names were Zahid himself and members of Anwar's family. The disclosure silenced critics and raised doubts over the credibility of Anwar, who had since then not raised the issue.

It has been a rapid decline for a once fast rising star.

Born in Bukit Mertajam, Penang in 1947, Anwar studied at the elite MCKK and Universiti Malaya where he was more noted for radical student activism than academic achievements.

Upon graduation in 1971, he help found Abim and began a career as a social critic.

In 1974, he was detained under the ISA for his role in the Baling demonstrations in support of poverty-stricken farmers.

Upon his release in 1976, Anwar continued his Islamic youth activism and by 1982 had acquired a formidable reputation as a government critic with a wide following in the campus, among the literati, Islamic youth and the international NGO movement.

"Therefore, his entry into Umno was a major coup for the party and for Dr Mahathir," said a former NGO colleague.

In that eventful year, Anwar won the Permatang Pauh parliamentary seat, was made Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, elected Permatang Pauh division chief and in September wrested Umno Youth's top post from incumbent Datuk Suhaimi Haji Kamaruddin by a 10-vote majority.

He remained as Umno Youth leader until 1987, contested and was elected Umno vice-president and in 1993 forced Ghafar out to become deputy president.

Anwar's rise in government was as swift as his climb up the party ladder. He became Culture, Youth and Sports Minister in 1983, Agriculture Minister in 1984, Education Minister in 1986, Finance Minister in 1991 and deputy Prime Minister in 1993.

Anwar's position as the uncontested number two in 1996, however, enabled him to become stronger in the party, sparking talk that he would be considering a possible challenge for the top post in 1999.

In the years before 1996 and after, Anwar professed his undivided loyalty to Dr Mahathir. The Prime Minister too, had repeated on a few occasions that Anwar was his heir apparent.

However, the June Umno assembly opened with an air of expectations and rebellion. Many smelt blood.

Anwar's key men raised the issues of nepotism and cronyism.

The international media, on cue, hit out at Dr Mahathir, who retaliated swiftly by releasing three long lists of leaders and their relatives who had benefitted from "positive discrimination" in the

awarding of government contracts.

Both also held diametrically divergent views on how to revive the stalled economy.

A hastily written book, *50 Reasons Why Anwar Cannot be Prime Minister*, caused severe damage to Anwar.

The book detailed sexual irregularities which Anwar has denied but its wide distribution during the assembly severely undermined Anwar's standing in the party.

"Anwar found it difficult to fight down the allegations especially after holding a high moral ground in politics for two decades," said an observer.

Some who knew him in his student days often recalled a teacher telling Anwar: "If I have to field a football team, I will not make you captain."

"Anwar was an orator, not a leader ... his feet and his ears were not on the ground," said a long-time friend of Anwar.

Anwar surrounded himself with intellectual admirers, theorist and "bookish" strategist none of whom were political animals schooled in the art of survival, said an academic observer.

"He was strong on Malay language, culture, religion and race but lacked political savvy and let political opportunities pass," the observer added.

He added that Dr Mahathir was a formidable opponent who had survived many trials in his political career that span five decades.

"Dr Mahathir is not a easy pushover like Ghafar Baba," said the academic, adding that politics was a constant art of alertness and survival and "Anwar was simply not up to it."