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Anwar - heir apparent, now a figure in isolation

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WHEN Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim moved back to his private residence in Damansara Heights more than a week ago, the grass in the garden of the double-storey bungalow had a manicured quality to it.

The grounds have since been reduced to a slushy quality, not unlike the aftermath of a stampede. There's hardly a blade of grass in sight and Anwar's Pajero and his father's Mercedes Benz - with the distinctive MR 101 plate - stand rather forlorn amid the disarray.

For days now, this section of the plush and affluent neighbourhood has come to resemble a busy balai raya with a pasar malam of sorts to boot.

People stream in and out of Anwar's house at all times of the day and, especially after nightfall, the crowd - supporters, friends and "sight-seers" - swells to overspill proportions.

The strategy of the team managing Anwar's "post-Umno" phase seems to be working. Periodic announcements that Anwar will be off on his roadshow - usually cancelled at the eleventh hour - finds more people turning up, thinking this may be their last opportunity to meet him.

And what a startling contrast all this has been to the picture inside Umno, the political party where he spent the last 16 years.

There, one party figure after another has declared support for the supreme council's decision to sack this one-time heir apparent to the Prime Minister.

His support in the party, particularly among the leadership tier - and support from this tip of the party pyramid is what actually matters in Umno politics - has evaporated almost overnight, collapsing like a house of cards.

"Sixteen years in politics and he took out with him only (Datuk Ahmad) Zahid Hamidi and Ruslan Kassim ... the only two elected politicians," was the somewhat nonplussed comment of a Kuala Lumpur lawyer.

Only a handful of well-known Umno faces have been seen at his house - Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Dr Rahim Ghouse, Ruhanie Ahmad, Saifuddin Nasution. The rest have bailed out like passengers from a political titanic.

Yet, this was the man almost always described as charismatic, who wrested the deputy president's post from the incumbent in 1993 without a contest and whose supporters flaunted themselves as "Anwar's boys", as people going places.

All manner of people hankered for his friendship and competed for his attention. He was so much in demand that journalists used to complain how he would entertain just a handful of questions before zooming off in his official car to yet another appointment.

At Umno general assemblies, delegates rushed to shake his hand and his winding-up speech was eagerly awaited for its polished delivery, literary flair and folksy wit.

But the extent of his clout was most highly evident during party elections as candidates clamoured for his endorsement. Thus, candidates who were not part of his Wawasan Team in the 1993 Umno elections found themselves fighting an uphill battle.

It was the rather belligerent campaign clout of the Anwar boys in the 1996 Umno elections that swept candidates like Zahid into the Youth leadership and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman into the Wanita chief's post.

Says supreme council member Datuk Syed Hamid Albar: "I think Anwar and his boys began to believe their success (in politics) was their own making. He forgot it was Dr Mahathir who made it possible."

The suggestion is that Anwar's rise from ex-Islamic activist to crown prince, would not have been entirely possible without the president's endorsement.

Anwar, charges the fiery supreme council member Datuk Ibrahim Ali, enjoyed opportunities that others in Umno could only dream of, or as he puts it, "di tatang macam anak raja" (cradled all the way like a princeling).

"He is ungrateful. I told him at the supreme council meeting, if I were you, I would kiss Dr Mahathir's feet," says Ibrahim who was the first to speak at the controversial meeting that expelled Anwar from the party.

At one stage, Ibrahim was so carried away that he banged the table twice, bringing security personnel through the door.

In fact, Ibrahim spoke for many others when he compared himself with Anwar: how both were student radicals and spent time in detention without trial before joining Umno.

But the similarity ended there for as Ibrahim says: "The difference between Anwar and me is that the party president promoted him every few years while I had to fight my own battles."

Anwar's rise through the party, notes political scientist Dr Ahmad Atory Hussain, was not without resentment among other ambitious politicians.

For instance, a large number of those who joined Tengku Razaleigh's Team B in 1987 were those who resented Anwar's rising star.

Likewise, Anwar's swing into the Deputy Prime Minister's post saw other seasoned figures like Datuk Abdullah Badawi and Tan Sri Sanusi Junid temporarily relegated to the sidelines.

In 1993 too, he was instrumental in getting Syed Hamid to withdraw from the Umno Youth race because he wanted the post to go to his Wawasan Team member, Tan Sri Rahim Thamby Chik.

"Well, I'm not the 'Hidup Anwar' type as you can see," says Syed Hamid now.

In other words, he alienated a sizeable segment of the Umno leadership along the way to the top. Incidentally, this is the group now most vocal about his alleged misdeeds.

And, says the same KL lawyer, despite his great personal charm, Anwar managed to "generate this element of distrust on a human level".

"He had this concentrated spurt of charm ... journalists know that, but his word was often not his bond. Even his own people found this constant shifting a bit too much. There was no centre to him and I don't think they really trusted him," says the lawyer.

Besides, there are very few of his boys who are not in some kind of financial bind as a result of the economic crisis and Anwar, now that he is out of the Government is no longer a political buoy for them to cling to.

Sanusi, another supreme council member, suggests that a large part of Anwar's appeal lay in his success in projecting himself as an Islamic figure.

"He was very popular because of his Islamic colours. Once that is in question, his popularity evaporates," he adds.

Another reason for his swift isolation has to do with the ruthless nature of politics. Umno is a very competitive party. Vacant slots appear down the line each time someone important goes and there is no shortage of people keen to jostle their way in.

Yet another reason why Anwar had found himself so alone so fast is the lesson learnt from the experiences of Tengku Razaleigh and his followers.

Says the veteran journalist Tan Sri Samad Ismail: "It's impossible ... no chance outside of Umno. Right from the very beginning of Umno, it's been like that. Datuk Onn (Jaafar) just faded into oblivion after he left to form the IMP."

Neither is it easy to make a comeback once you leave.

"That's the Umno culture. When you are out, you're out. Malays, by and large, are very conservative ... you don't simply upset the applecart," he says.

Samad remembers seeing Datuk Onn, several years after his departure from Umno, waiting for a bus along then Batu Road. Likewise, Tunku threw a party shortly after retiring and only a handful of people turned up.

Incidentally, Samad was one of the better-known faces who turned up at Anwar's house where he advised the younger man to "serahkanlah kepada Allah" (surrender to God's will).

But Anwar's "Reformasi" cry leaves him cold.

Says Samad: "At the moment, we need a strong man to head the country and whatever you may say about Mahathir, we need him to survive this crisis."

A large number of ordinary people are still reeling from the sensational nature of Anwar's expulsion and it is likely they are still trying to make sense of what they read and hear.

For instance, a Wanita Umno member in Anwar's Permatang Pauh division was so distraught that she could not do any housework for several days. Her husband was sent out to get nasi bungkus because she was simply too upset and immersed in the unfolding events to cook.

"Removing a deputy is not a total shock but the circumstances caught many people by surprise," says the environmentalist Gurmit Singh who knew Anwar in university.

The foreign media is going along the lines that Anwar's political demise and the allegations levelled against him are a result of his trying to challenge Dr Mahathir as well as disagreements over economic policies.

But Dr Mahathir has made it amply clear that the sacking of his one-time appointee had less to do with the above reasons than the fact that he is no longer considered suitable to lead the country because of grave moral and personal dismeantour.

Says Gurmit: "The public is not sure where the truth lies. The media - local and foreign - and the rumour mills ... they all carry different things. You don't know what to believe so, ultimately, people will just have to make their own personal judgement."

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