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'Reformasi' a camouflage for the man of many contradictions?

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DATUK Seri Anwar Ibrahim has lost some weight and his voice is hoarse from the blistering ceramah pace of the past week.

Those who have spoken to him at close quarters say he looks tired, even exhausted, but you would not have been able to tell from the performance he puts up at his ceramah round.

Several times, with the aid of just a loudhailer - a throwback to the earlier round of anti-establishment days - he has delivered speeches filled with fury and self-defence, his eyebrows often arched in an inverted omega and his hands gesticulating to stress one heated point after another.

Lately too, he has been seen sporting a spectacularly ornate ring - a gleaming dark gem almost as big as an eyeball, and circled by smaller glittering jewels.

The ring, said to be a pengadang (shield), has led to all sorts of speculation including one about how bomoh now command a higher retainer than lawyers.

"Very un-Abim" was the remark of an Umno politician who had also noticed the new piece of jewellery, and I recall how Abim president Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman had raised a curious eyebrow at an NST colleague who wears a ring on every finger.

Abim, the acronym for the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement, was the first group to throw its weight behind its former and most famous leader and his new-found reformation campaign.

The movement has remained steadfast to Anwar throughout his 16 years in Government although the latter was perceived as trying to distance himself from the movement as his political star rose.

A week ago, Anwar unveiled his reformation movement with the Permatang Pauh declaration in his parliamentary constituency of the same name.

But even before that, chants of "reformasi! reformasi!" - and, of course, "Hidup Anwar!" - have greeted him wherever he has gone.

But not everyone is as wholehearted about Anwar's reformation call as Abim and Ahmad Azam.

Says the straight-talking environmentalist Gurmit Singh: "It (the Permatang Pauh declaration) sounds like a political manifesto to me. I'm not exactly clear ... does he mean political reform or something much broader like social reform?"

Gurmit knew, or rather knew of, Anwar from their days as students at Universiti Malaya. He was a student unionist whereas Anwar was making waves as a champion of language and religious issues. Strangely enough, their paths rarely crossed.

They got to know each other a little better during the Societies Act campaign of the late 1970s, but it was shortlived for one afternoon, Anwar asked Gurmit to chair a meeting on the campaign, pleading another appointment.

What he neglected to tell Gurmit was that he was joining Umno that very day.

"He never bothered to return to tell us and I've never bothered to ask him," says Gurmit.

In that sense, the burly environmentalist cannot be blamed if he is a little sceptical about the intentions of the one-time activist.

"Reformasi ... it's meaningless unless more elaborately spelt out. And

don't forget, he also talked about reforming when he joined Umno," he adds.

Social critic and writer Rustam A. Sani recently visited the sidelined politician for the first time in more than 10 years.

"I knew him quite well when he was in Abim, less well after he joined the Government. I can't say I have ever been a supporter (of Anwar) but I have quite a lot of sympathy for what happened to him just as I do for (Lim) Guan Eng.

"My stand is simple: he is innocent until proven otherwise, and if he is found guilty the proper way, I will accept it and change my views accordingly."

Anwar's reformation campaign, Rustam says, impresses him in some areas and not at all in others.

"There's a brave thrust to his arguments but I don't think he's suddenly come to his senses ... the truth is he's been forced out and he's reacting," he adds.

Gurmit puts it more bluntly: "There's an element of opportunism."

The position taken by most other interest groups has been to refrain from joining the debate of whether the man did it or did not. Rather, they have mainly stuck to questioning the manner by which he was dismissed and the way the allegations have been played up in the media.

"Undemocratic and against the rule of law" was the comment of one labour activist.

But as politician and constitutional lawyer Datuk Dr Rais Yatim argues: "We follow the Westminster style. All the Prime Minister needs to do is to wink at the Minister who has to go ... and off you go."

Neither does the Prime Minister have to explain the sacking of a Minister beyond what he deems proper. This was basically what happened in 1987 when several Ministers who sided with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah against Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad were replaced in the Cabinet.

"Tengku Razaleigh and I resigned earlier, but in the main, we just took the dismissal as a principle binding on us," says Rais.

But Anwar, notes this former Parti Melayu Semangat '46 leader, seems to have taken the dismissal as an issue to go to town with.

"Anwar may have overlooked the Prime Ministerial functions, duties and obligations under the Constitution. Article 38 onwards is very clear on that," he adds.

Unsurprisingly, it is mainly those in Umno who have taken the greatest exception to Anwar's reformation campaign. They regard it as a direct affront to and repudiation of all that Umno stands for.

Umno Youth exco member Zulkifli Alwi, a former aide to Datuk Seri Najib Razak, charges: "His attacks suggest that Umno is stagnant, undynamic and even obsolete. Is he saying that his years in Government have been futile, that he's made so little impact? Umno is a reformation movement in its own right."

"It's so clear he is trying to divert attention from the issue of his personal conduct," says Merbok Wanita Umno head Rosnah Majid.

She is particularly taken aback by Anwar's swift retaliation against the very party where he had spent 16 years.

"It shows he has never accepted the Umno spirit. Look at Mat Taib (former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib), he is still in Umno, quietly attending functions. But Anwar, the moment he is out, he starts attacking the party and Government," says Rosnah.

"Reformasi means to topple Dr Mahathir ... what else?" retorts Umno supreme council member Datuk Ibrahim Ali.

Kota Baru Umno treasurer Zahari Wahab notes rather wryly: "He seems to have forgotten that he was the No. 2 man in the country. When he runs down

the Government and Umno, he runs down himself."

More than a few Umno people are peeved that Anwar has continued along the "cronyism and nepotism" line of attack when he himself is not entirely free from such implications.

It is no secret that a number of Anwar's relatives and "Anwar boys" are directors and chairmen in companies belonging to the very people whom his supporters accuse of being cronies of the Prime Minister.

In other words, Anwar's action is not very different from someone hitting his hand into a bowl of muddy water; it splatters into his own face.

And it is traces of such residue that now hold back many groups which would otherwise have embraced him without qualms.

Some like social activist Fan Yew Teng, recently re-absorbed into the DAP, do not mind giving him another chance.

"He did try to come down on corruption, dilute repressive laws," says Fan who was among the first to pay a sympathy call on Anwar.

But those who still remember the promises he made when he left Abim for the Government, what he has done is eclipsed by what he has not done.

Says Gurmit: "He disappointed me on a number of important issues and I have always fought on issues ... not personalities."

Besides, says former academic Ahmad Shabery Chik, the contradictions connected to Anwar, then and now, are simply too many.

"You want reform yet you want to maintain the system; you attack Dr Mahathir for cronyism but you are so closely associated with a Suharto crony; you are Islamic but you cavort with someone from a gambling outfit," says Shabery.

The last point rankles quite a number of Muslims including an Abim man who says that "if Brother Anwar had wanted to play tennis, there are many of us (in Abim) who play the game".

And while the Malays/Muslims complain that his reformation call "has no Malay agenda" and "has no focus on Islam", the non-Malay segment of the population finds the racial and religious angles to his speeches somewhat disturbing.

Anwar's appearance at a DAP venue is also unlikely to go down well with hardcore Umno types while the latest issue of Harakah, the official Pas newspaper, is stacked with Anwar Ibrahim articles. Pas is not wooing him - yet - but it is certainly making the most out of the political situation.

Meanwhile, Umno people seem to be trying to downplay the crowds at Anwar's roadshow. "Spectators" and "out of curiosity" are some of their explanations for the massive crowds, especially in Malay areas.

In reality, the reformasi line has washed with very few Malays. Most see it for what it is - a camouflage against the very grave allegations being levelled against Anwar.

But it is undeniable that a sizeable portion turns up out of sympathy because Anwar the personality is really too immense to be wiped out just like that.

People, as Rustam puts it rather rationally, are still sorting out things in their minds.

And the fact that they are looking for answers from all sides can only be read as a positive sign for the Malaysian mind.

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