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The falling from grace of a leader who would have been PM

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FOR Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the man responsible for inducting former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim into active politics and the Government, the decision to drop his once heir-apparent was probably a most difficult and painful one.

Perhaps, this could be likened to a decision made by a father on a son; or that of a mentor on his protege. In reality, this was a decision made by the Prime Minister on a deputy whom many believed was groomed to eventually take over the nation's stewardship.

It was obvious to many that Dr Mahathir has more than a soft spot for Anwar, seen at one time as the youth leader whose ideals were similar or parallel to that of the Prime Minister.

It was a relationship so special that others could see that Anwar was Dr Mahathir's chosen one. Until Wednesday that is.

During the last 16 years of Anwar's active politics in Umno, Dr Mahathir had stood by him, defending him every time he was criticised by detractors.

Even when the Prime Minister received an open letter in August last year alleging that Anwar was involved in sexual improprieties, Dr Mahathir had brushed it aside.

It was at the Shah Alam racing circuit on Aug 24 last year where reporters had first asked Dr Mahathir on the letter which he reportedly received a few weeks before.

Although Dr Mahathir confirmed receiving the letter, he maintained that his deputy was innocent and that such allegations were baseless and aimed at damaging Anwar's political career.

Of course at the time when Dr Mahathir made the statement, police investigation into the allegations had just begun.

A few weeks later, Dr Mahathir repeated that such allegations were not only baseless but absurd.

The whole issue took a new twist when a book titled 50 Dalil Mengapa Anwar Tidak Boleh Jadi PM (50 Reasons Why Anwar Cannot Become PM), which contained various allegations about Anwar, surfaced during the Umno general assembly in June.

Since the book's appearance, several police reports had been lodged, including one by the publisher Khairuddin Hassan who urged police to investigate the contents of the book.

When Anwar first became active in politics in March 1982, some people resented it. They felt that Anwar, a Universiti Malaya student activist with religious credentials, would not fit in with some of the liberals.

They were also suspicious of him because Anwar, as president of the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, was seen to be more sympathetic towards Pas until 1982 when he decided to go into active politics through Umno.

Some Abim members chose not to support him when he contested in the general election under the Barisan Nasional ticket.

However, Dr Mahathir had then reassured Anwar's critics and maintained that he saw Anwar as a man who occupied a pivotal position in the interplay of forces of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia.

When Anwar won the Umno deputy presidency in 1993 uncontested after incumbent Ghafar Baba (now Tun) withdrew from the race, there was much speculation that he would attempt to unseat Dr Mahathir as both Prime Minister and party president.

Although the foreign Press continued to speculate that this had created a rift between Dr Mahathir and Anwar, the party president continued to ignore their remarks, reaffirming each time that Anwar was his successor.

At regular intervals, fresh speculations about a strain in the relationship between the two would arise. They were, however, met with denials.

Such trust Dr Mahathir had in Anwar that he was even made acting Prime Minister and Home Minister when Dr Mahathir took a two-month leave in June last year.

But anxiety, it seems, soon replaced the trust after allegations of sexual improprieties began to haunt Anwar. The courts are going to decide. There is speculation that the Government is anxious over the outcome and wants to distance itself from any unpleasantness.

It is also widely speculated that there had been some major policy differences between Dr Mahathir and Anwar over measures to revive the economy.

Whatever the compelling reasons, these and others may have pushed Dr Mahathir towards the decision to remove Anwar from all positions in the Government.

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