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Umno shaken but ready to put latest episode behind it

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THE crowd at the marbled foyer of the Putra World Trade Centre on Thursday evening was mostly male and Malay and had begun arriving as early as 6pm.

They were simply but neatly attired - definitely not the lepak or the boisterous type - and stood in twos or threes, waiting for the outcome of the Umno supreme council meeting.

By the time Thursday slipped into early Friday, the less involved among the crowd were more than convinced that this seemingly well-mannered and disciplined crowd could be as unpredictable as the weather - calm and sedate one moment and erupting like a volcano the next.

They surged forward like a well-oiled mass of bodies each time a VIP passed through, and particularly, when the VIP was the focus of the evening, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

And their voices, whether in assent or disapproval, had a raw, almost primal quality to it and several journalists in the crowd could be seen glancing about them with some alarm.

"Frankly I was shocked ... I was right in the middle of it," says Umno supreme council member Datuk Syed Hamid Albar who, at the end of the meeting, had emerged from a lift about the same time as the party president to a crush of bodies and thundering voices.

A large segment of the crowd - allegedly a co-mingling of students and Umno and Abim (Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement) members - was there in a show of support for Anwar, stripped of his posts of Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister a day earlier and, shortly after midnight of Thursday, expelled from Umno.

Yes, Malays do take their politics seriously, perhaps, even passionately.

Malay politics is more than just voting once every five years or so. For the Malays, politics goes beyond constitutional rights and economic nitty-gritty to encompass the very sense of identity of the Malays.

In Umno, this is perhaps best summed up by the oft-used phrase, and which has no comparable English equivalent, Umno membela kaum Melayu whereas for Pas, the combination of religion and politics has worked out to be a potent fusion.

Thus, very few in Umno, even those most censorious of Anwar, pretend the party will be unaffected in the months to come.

Days after the sacking, the shockwaves are still reverberating everywhere, and particularly, among the Malay community.

For instance, a Malay editor was still getting calls from kin and friends from his home State asking the inevitable, "Betulkah?"

"Everyone is still in a state of shock. This has never happened before ... having the DPM and Finance Minister sacked and expelling him from the party. But we had to do it," says Syed Hamid, who was already back in his Kota Tinggi constituency the morning after the critical meeting, explaining the situation to his grassroots base.

Umno leaders at all levels, says this Johor leader, "should explain and explain until there are no question marks left".

They will have to explain why the party had to move quickly and decisively against Anwar for comparisons will surely be made with earlier precedents; they will also have to convince their listeners that the party was not prejudging Anwar by expelling him.

Umno leaders are aware that Anwar's influence in the party is unlikely

to evaporate overnight.

He was, after all, the anointed successor to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and he held the coveted Finance Minister post that made him a very central and influential figure during the boom years.

His talent for oratory captivated admirers and his then stature as a future Prime Minister attracted a variety of followers like bees to the honeypot - genuine supporters, hangers-on as well as outright opportunists, they clamoured to know and be close to him.

More than a few politicians hitched their own ambitions to the trail he blazed especially in the years after he took over from Tun Ghafar Baba.

These people became known as the "Anwar boys" and assumed a brashness that bordered on arrogance and a political style that came to be known - rather wryly - as Melayu Baru.

As a journalist notes: "Anwar's boys are very, very visible. They are go-getters, so they have to be visible."

Anwar's boys, the journalist goes on to say, usually have some tertiary education though not necessarily knowledge, they are articulate, ambitious and very impatient.

"What you will often hear from them is that the party needs young people, new blood ... all the time. So, what is old? Is 50 old?" says the journalist.

For that reason too, some think a chunk of Anwar's support may be more perception than real and besides, the trouble with having go-getters and opportunists as supporters is that they are likely to be fair-weather friends.

Nevertheless, vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak describes events of the past week to be "quite a big crisis but certainly not insurmountable".

"The important thing is the party. We are quite sanguine about weathering any kind of crisis as long as we adhere to the tradition of closing ranks and rallying behind the president," he says.

For a start, crises are hardly new to Umno. The party's founding years were marked by Datuk Onn Jaafar's resignation as president because of differences with other party leaders over a number of party policies.

Since then, there have been numerous incidents and events which have stirred, afflicted and even altered the party.

The corruption trial and conviction of Datuk Harun Idris, the former Selangor Menteri Besar and charismatic Umno Youth leader, goes down as one of the most shattering episodes of Umno's history - for the way it affected the party and for his mesmerising hold over the youth section of Umno.

And before that, there were, says veteran Tan Sri Aishah Ghani, the sacking of Cabinet member Aziz Ishak and Dr Mahathir's expulsion from Umno for questioning the policies of Tunku Abdul Rahman's administration.

The conviction of one-time Minister Datuk Mokhtar Hashim for murder was also an event that left the party stunned about the motivation and consequences of political ambition.

Then came Tan Sri Musa Hitam's resignation as Deputy Prime Minister, followed by the mother of all party crises - the devastating contest for leadership of Umno.

And before this latest episode concerning Anwar, there was the sensational "Rahim Tamby Chik issue" as well as Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib's trial in Australia.

"But Umno survived each crisis and in fact grew stronger," says Najib.

Even Youth secretary Saifuddin Nasution who is unabashedly aligned to Anwar, admits as much.

"Anwar has a lot of grassroots support but when it comes to issues over personalities, the party still comes first. Umno is a solid structure,"

says Saifuddin.

Besides, says Malay intellectual Rustam A. Sani: "It is difficult to put up a challenge, it depends on how much strength you have. Tengku Razaleigh (Hamzah) was strong enough to amount to a party but even they (Tengku Razaleigh and his supporters) came back. The prize is still within the party in power. After some time, people cool down and come back."

The politics of power is probably something which Dr Mahathir understands better than others as evident from the meticulous way in which he has mobilised all the crucial organs and mechanisms of the party in connection with this issue.

The same is difficult to be said for Anwar despite his years in politics. Yes, he had a political savvy in the manner by which he climbed so steadily up the political ladder, the way he chose his issues and causes and in the way he projected himself in the media.

Yet, beneath that savvy seems to lie a certain political naivety about the game of politics and particularly about the strategic style of his ex-political boss.

For instance, he told CNN last week, "I thought he would have done it in a more refined way," when talking about his sacking from the Government and Umno.

"How quaint," was the comment of someone watching on, "that after all this time, he still connects refinement to politics and power."

The acquisition and consolidation of power, to take the Machiavellian point of view, has less to do with refinement than about taking stock of the circumstances and knowing how and when to break conventional moral codes.

And often, those watching on tend to lend too much weight to the crossing of swords taking place at the top.

They forget that the overwhelming bulk of Umno is still made up of quite ordinary men and women to whom the party is simply too precious to be sacrificed for personalities.

Najib is confident that this bedrock of Umno will rally to the party call to remain calm, have faith in the leadership and respect the decisions made. "They know the party is bigger and more important than any individual."

The real battle, Najib suggests, will be that of winning the hearts and minds of those outside the party and whose opinions and perceptions of what is happening will have a bearing on the outcome of the next general election.

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