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Week of mind-boggling swing in images, emotions

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WHEN the brief demonstration after Friday prayers at the National Mosque dispersed without any untoward incident, it was not just the city's population who heaved a sigh of relief, but the security personnel stationed at the scene as well.

The memory of the mob scenes that had erupted at the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim demonstration at this very site last Sunday was still fresh on most people's minds.

And it was unlikely that the public or the police wished a repeat of out-of-control demonstrators tearing through the streets with the FRU in hot pursuit.

Life in the capital the last one week has been a mind-boggling swing of events and images.

For instance, late Sunday afternoon, as Anwar addressed a big crowd from the balcony of the National Mosque, Queen Elizabeth II, serenely unruffled, was attending a special Evensong service at St Mary's Church just a stone's throw away.

And a great many Malaysians were watching Sapok Biki punch his way to Malaysia's first boxing gold medal while a segment of the protesters marched off towards Umno's Putra World Trade Centre where they smashed up exhibits before heading towards Sri Perdana supposedly with arson in mind.

A couple and their three children happily making their way back from an afternoon of watching the gymnasts at Putra Stadium were rudely shaken out of their reverie when, along Jalan Mahameru, protesters banged on their car roof and demanded that they sound their car horn in support and join them in shouting "Reformasi!"

Other contrasting images: Anwar asking Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to step down versus rapturous applause and cheers at every Sukom venue where the Prime Minister showed up; Anwar labelling his former "guru" a "dictator" versus Dr Mahathir dismissing his one-time "protege" as a "sexual deviant".

Malaysians, as the rather ironic Chinese saying goes, are living in interesting times.

Shock over the earlier sacking of the former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister seems to have been overlaid by confusion and even deeper shock over the nature of the allegations that have emerged against him.

"Sunday's newspapers ... sodomy. I never thought I would come across anything like that in my lifetime," says a Universiti Malaya lecturer.

Over the weeks, the issue has reached an emotional level almost parallel, it is said, to the acrimonious kafir-mengafir period when Pas accused Umno members of being infidels - only this time around, Pas is reported to be deeply sympathetic to Anwar.

Says the same lecturer: "I try to avoid discussion because I have no heart to listen. It's a big, big tragedy ... a tragedy if it's true and a tragedy if it's fitnah."

But it is not quite possible to avoid discussion as a retired lecturer writing a book on Johor Umno has learnt.

The ex-lecturer who has been interviewing veteran Umno figures for his book says: "First, I interview them. Then without fail, every single one of them 'interview' me about the issue."

Increasingly, this soft-spoken intellectual finds himself telling this to those he meets: "I'm just sad and confused. I don't quite know what to

believe."

And, as many people would have learnt too by now, neither is it possible to carry on a discussion without one party asking the other to make a stand by asking: "Do you believe ...?"

This, in spite of the fact a number of people, including lawyers and activists, have urged that the issue be considered in terms of the rule of law and principles of natural justice.

The trouble is that the personalities involved are simply too big and over-powering for their supporters to keep a level head and, perhaps, more important, the stakes involved are greater than imagined.

There is, on the one hand, Dr Mahathir and an overwhelming number of top Umno leaders who were responsible for acting against Anwar and who now hold the upper hand of power and resources with which to put across their side of the moral argument.

This is the core group which has now fanned itself out all over the country to explain to the Umno grassroots why the Umno leadership had to act so dramatically, even harshly, against its own flesh and blood.

On the other side is Anwar.

He has been rendered an outsider in a matter of weeks, but his advantage is that he still has supporters who are willing to do almost anything to defend his name and honour.

To put it simply, people, especially the Malays who make up roughly 50 per cent of the country's population, find that they are being asked to take sides.

It is an immensely disturbing experience and it has, quite frankly, polarised them into emotional camps.

Or as academic Khoo Boo Teik wrote in the latest issue of Aliran Monthly: "The blindly anti-Anwar people will accept and use them (the allegations) without further ado. The solidly pro-Anwar people will reject them out of hand."

But, as he notes, many people belong to neither camp.

And this is the group which is probably grappling hardest for answers.

Just how polemic the issue has become is best reflected in the way the various camps interpret and react to every single incident.

For instance, Anwar's public rallies prior to his arrest are viewed by supreme council member Datuk Syed Hamid Syed Albar as "selfish and unthinking of what happens to the country"; but those sympathetic to Anwar insist their man had no other channel to make himself heard to the people.

Or take the destruction of party property by pro-Anwar demonstrators of which Perak Wanita Umno chief Aionon Khairiyah Mohd Abas says: "Breaking into PWTC and destroying things ... that's not the way we do things in Umno, no matter how different our opinions. We have good and fond memories of our past leaders and kampung people don't like that sort of behaviour."

The pro-Anwar group, however, claims the violence was incited by "outsiders", for why would they want to undermine their own campaign with hooliganism?

Aionon's belief that "Anwar will be given a fair trial so it is not necessary to take his case to the streets" is in sharp contrast to the other side's view that Anwar has already been "tried and convicted".

And while many within Umno find Dr Mahathir's recent televised explanation for his sacking of his deputy convincing and enlightening, those sympathetic to Anwar continue to see "conspiracy" written over everything that is said.

Even the pair of court convictions directly implicating Anwar have failed to convince them.

They ask mockingly: "Where is the evidence. A confession is not evidence."

There is a lot of anger, too - with what they perceive to be Anwar's trial by the media, over the daily attacks against Anwar, and among his staunch supporters, the belief that he is the hapless victim of a political conspiracy.

Umno leaders admit frankly that the initial reaction of their grassroots base has been outright shock and disbelief.

"But the attitude is changing as the picture gets clearer," says Syed Hamid of his Kota Tinggi constituents.

Also, the experience of Merbok Wanita Umno head Rosnah Majid after a series of closed-door ceramah she conducted in her division is that it was much easier explaining the issue to the rural people than the urban populace.

The urban set seems less willing to accept things at face value, more insistent on hard evidence, and has more questions to ask.

But Anwar's trial, when it comes, will not only have to convince rural and urban Malaysians but also the international community among whom he is a well-known figure.

And that is why many Malaysians - whether pro-Anwar, anti-Anwar or those in neither camp - believe that the most conclusive way out of their confusion is for the allegations to be tested in a fair and open court and, to quote academic Khoo, before judges of unimpeachable credentials.

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