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What now, Anwar Ibrahim?

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ANWAR wasn't my hero. He was my rebel. And I like rebels. It appealed to the rebel in me that he - an outsider and a student radical - came to the notice of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad some 16 years ago and took his place in Government.

It was around the same time that I began learning about my religion. The Iranian Revolution had just taken place and Islam was becoming a powerful political force in the world.

I also had the perfect teacher - an American-Syrian Christian in Boston University - who guided me in the exploration of my religion.

Until then, I had given minimal attention to faith, assuming that it was merely the rituals that I needed to be concerned about.

My studies revealed otherwise. Behind the religion was a wealth of information which I hadn't known.

From the history to the philosophy of Islam to the life of the Prophet, I found great comfort in this religion that was mine.

If my primary school religious teachers had frightened me with the many harsh punishments facing Muslims who were lax in their duties to God, my studies taught me that Islam was fair and compassionate towards humankind.

Later, I learnt that it was also one of the first religions to emancipate women and of this, I was especially proud.

When I first heard about Anwar I was determined to meet the man but I remember at the time worrying about the rise of the clergy in Iran.

Had the Iranians substituted one authoritarian regime for another, I wondered?

With him in Government, I was sure Malaysia would not be foolish enough to trudge down the same route.

In early 1985, my husband, infant son and I returned home. Things were changing. I had been unsure about settling down in Malaysia some years earlier when I returned from Australia but this time I was sure.

For this was home and I was big-headed enough to believe that I could help usher a more enlightened, progressive Islam into the country.

Within weeks of my return to work, I met him and was immediately bowled over by his candid ways.

He was certainly not the typical bush-jacketed politician I had grown used to.

Although friends were sceptical, insisting that he was full of affectations, that he merely skimmed the rhetorical surface in his crusade for Islam, that he was bringing an Arabised Islam into the country, I continued to like the man.

In my encounters with him, he was always charming and attentive. He also had ideas - a refreshing change from the politicians I had known.

Dressed in his "mechanic" shirts and capal, he would talk easily and fervently about Islamisation of knowledge. Because of the kind of stories I was pursuing then, he shared with me his concerns about the spread of mediocrity in local academic institutions.

Later, I was to discover that many of the articles and speeches he had supposedly authored were written by his smart young assistants. Still, I had hopes that he would be the Renaissance man many had said he would be.

In my eyes, Anwar stood out because of his ability to see beyond the usual. He opened himself to the world, was an enthusiastic proponent of civil society, and also an earnest Muslim.

I was hopeful that he would one day gather sufficient courage to resurrect the practice of ijtihad (independent reasoning) which would breathe new life into the religion and reduce the conspicuous gap between faith and our day-to-day realities.

By the early '90s, I had become involved in non-governmental work, spreading through booklets the message that there is equality between men and women in Islam and that women have never been in any way inferior or subordinate to men.

Our research showed that centuries of built-in male bias in the interpretation of Islam had skewed laws and stigmatised women, causing enormous injustices to those needing help in Muslim communities.

Although the Prime Minister showed more interest in the work my friends and I were doing, I still felt Anwar could be persuaded to listen one day.

In the meantime, he was growing in stature. He had moved from ministry to ministry and was now wearing shoes; the sandals were nowhere to be seen.

The last I heard, before last week's sacking and expulsion from Umno, his double-breasted suits were hand-stitched, he had a hankering for the opera and he enjoyed both Eastern and Western classical music.

Were these accoutrements of wealth and success a sign that he had changed?

I wondered about the rebel I once admired, but these new bits of information were still viewed with some relief. His clothes, his sophistication, his dealings with leaders of the world pointed to a pragmatism that was necessary in the ordering of a multi-racial, multi-religious society.

My non-Muslim friends were anxious for nothing, I thought. They had been afraid that his rise would dramatically reduce the spaces for them. I assured them that this would not happen as he was too practical, too much a politician to allow this.

I have grown so much older in the days since he was sacked. In the pit of my stomach lies a heavy lump of dismay. In my heart, a sense of foreboding and sadness.

Two days ago, I drove past his house, wondering about him and his wife. These thoughts ran through my mind: What is he thinking about? What of his future and the future of a more progressive Islam in this country? Would it serve any purpose to suddenly plunge down the Reformasi path when he was all along sailing with us in a somnambulant state towards prosperity?

He is now surrounded by people who not only bear grudges against the Government but also those said to be responsible for the Apcet fracas in November, 1996. These individuals reportedly spent a great deal of time in Anwar's house.

We live in contradictory and ambivalent times.

My hopes of seeing a more progressive Islam now lie squarely on the shoulders of the Prime Minister. But, as he must know, the removal of dogmatic views on Islam isn't easy.

The bigger worry now is how we explain this to our children. Indeed, what would they be thinking of the man, of his leadership, of leaders in general?

Anwar stood on high moral ground with his Islamic credentials and whatever he says, it would require a strenuous act of will to remove the seeds of doubt now planted in the minds of many.

When he joined Umno, he was accused of selling out. "I will change Umno from within," he had said.

What now?

Was he ever a rebel? What of his dreams? Did they exist? Have they remained the same? Or have they died alongside mine?

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