

10/09/1998

Who is the real Anwar Ibrahim?

Joceline Tan

A WEEK, as they say, is a long time in politics. And it could not be more true for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Just a little more than a week ago, Anwar was still going about his ministerial duties as though born to it - flitting from function to meeting several times a day, delivering fine speeches, stylishly attired and surrounded by reverential audiences wherever he went.

"He looks so different now," were the words of a journalist after an evening assigned to the former Deputy Prime Minister/Finance Minister's house in the posh Bukit Damansara enclave.

And he does. These days, he is more casual in manners as well as dress, and even invites visitors to drop the "Datuk Seri" for the more comradely "brother" or saudara.

He has also become highly critical of the system of which he had been part of for the last 16 years and those who have known him since his radical undergraduate days say he seems "almost like the old Anwar".

It is also those in this group who are adamant that Anwar has been wronged, even framed. They find the allegations associated with him simply too outrageous even to consider.

It is probable too that a large segment of the public is just as incredulous for the allegations were difficult to relate to the moral and high-minded image fostered by Anwar over the years.

Anwar, it must be remembered, joined Umno as some sort of alternative hero thanks to his student activism and subsequent leadership of Abim (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia). In fact, it was with something akin to an air of coup that Umno welcomed him for its rival Pas was also courting him.

His early years in Umno were marked by his championing of Malay issues like Islam, Bahasa Malaysia and Malay poverty. He seemed to inject these issues with a fervour of his own largely because of the way he was able to articulate them; he was a splendid orator.

But it took longer to temper his reputation as a Malay and Islamic radical among the non-Malay population; it was only in the 1990s, following the liberalisation of a host of economic and cultural policies, that he made headway among this group.

Many believe that it was around then - and particularly after he moved into the Deputy Prime Minister's post - that Anwar began to cultivate seriously the sort of image which he wished to present to the world.

There was a conscious effort to shed the radical Malay/Islamic extremist image with a high-profile move towards multi-cultural issues.

For instance, while he continued to take the Islamic platform, he also began to talk about Confucianism, an Asian renaissance and Asian philosophers like Tagore and Rizal. His promotion of a moral, transparent and accountable society also won him admirers.

It was around then, and shortly after a series of highly flattering cover stories of him in regional and international magazines, that a colleague commented: "I don't know who the real Anwar is anymore."

Actually, quite a number of people had wondered the same years earlier.

These were the ones who remember that Anwar had joined Umno to change the system from within, but by the late 1980s, they thought the system had instead changed Anwar.

Anwar was, and still is, much more media-savvy than most other Malaysian

politicians - he is telegenic, articulate though not necessarily substantive and has a great deal of personal charm.

He was the media darling and the media - local and foreign - played a big part in creating this image.

The local Press, for a long time, hung on to his every word, reporting it often and copiously.

On the other hand, the foreign media - and this is well-known among the journalistic fraternity - was often given first-rate hospitality by those behind-the-scenes men, the ones who were part of the Anwar-for-PM team and who thought out strategies for him, wrote his speeches and analysed his every move.

It was a carefully selected team and an even more carefully cultivated image that projected Anwar as a worldly figure, a progressive and moderate Muslim, intellectual and well-read, pro-poor and pro-environment, comfortable whether at a poetry-reading session or international economic forum and willing to listen to alternative groups and views.

He tried to be what a lawyer describes as "all things to all men" and there was definitely a populist style to his approach on a number of issues.

"And because the media play such a critical role in the objectives of such politicians, they tend to move with the mood of the media, allowing the media to dictate who and what they are. After a while, you begin to lose track of the media-created man and the real man ... like a game of mirrors," says the lawyer.

Anwar, it is suggested, is one politician who is highly dependent on the media viewpoint and who was moulded by the media.

In that sense, he was part of the global political trend that saw a shift from the politics of conviction - associated with figures like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Margaret Thatcher - to a more media-savvy brand of politics played by politicians who administrate by emoting.

But Anwar's larger-than-life image would not have been possible if not for the numerous doors which Dr Mahathir opened for him from the day he joined Umno, from one Ministry to another and from one party post to another higher party post.

Many a time, these doors were opened at the expense and to the chagrin of other equally ambitious Umno leaders. Right from the start too, there was this aura around him, that he was the protege, the one being groomed to lead the party.

As a result, he enjoyed a great deal of latitude as Deputy Prime Minister and was accorded a prominence and importance quite unparalleled of other deputies.

But having endorsed and supported Anwar all these years, why would the Prime Minister now want to conspire to remove his annointed successor? It's true, Dr Mahathir has outlived two deputies but Tan Sri Musa Hitam resigned whereas Tun Ghafar Baba was forced out by Anwar.

Those who are behind the Prime Minister's bold action against Anwar suggest that this time around, the issue is not about a power struggle or disagreements over economic policies.

All that, as Dr Mahathir declared yesterday, he would have been able to handle without affecting Anwar's position.

The reasons behind Anwar's sacking, as the Prime Minister has suggested, is far, far more serious, with implications that impinge on the very future of the country and its people.

And the reasons may have to do with who is the real Anwar Ibrahim.

(END)