

20/06/1999

Exorcising the Anwar ghost from Umno

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THE heartache is not Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's alone, although his must be worse.

When he brought Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim into Umno in 1982, it was dubbed the Barisan Nasional's greatest pre-election coup. When he was sacked last year, it became a conspiracy for some.

Mohd Isa Ahmad, 55, an ordinary Umno member from the Tanah Merah branch in the Pendang division in Kedah, shares the Prime Minister's pain.

But he would like to believe that he suffered more than the Prime Minister.

If Dr Mahathir knew Anwar as a rabble-rousing student leader in the 70s, Mohd Isa said he knew Anwar as fellow budak kampung (village boy) in Permatang Pauh in Penang decades earlier.

He remembers Anwar's flawlessly attired (by the village standard at least) father, Datuk Ibrahim Abdul Rahman, who, he said, looked like a well-known P. Ramlee-generation Malay film star.

He remembers an elder brother of Anwar who was an English teacher and a village hippie icon.

In those heady days in the late 60s and the early part of the 70s, when the rejection of the convention was a phenomenon, being a hippie or, at the very least looking hippie-like, was hip.

Most of all, he remembers the simple ball game of randas (the mispronunciation of rounders, the bat and ball game widely played until the 70s) and the many nights the boys, including Anwar, spent bunking in the make-shift balai at wedding feasts.

It was customary then for the balai, or temporary timber and attap tent, to be built to serve as a dining hall for the guests in the day time and as sleeping quarters for relatives who came from distant places and neighbours who were too tired to go home.

For the kampung boys, a wedding feast was a dream - the free meals, time to forget school, opportunity to strengthen the bond of friendship and the time to marvel at the swinging hips of the "ghazal party" dancers, most of whom were men dressed in women's clothes.

One of the best known ghazal party groups then was the "Ghazal Party Kepala Batas".

Today, Kepala Batas is better known as the place from where the Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, hails.

When I met Mohd Isa at the Umno general assembly on Friday, he could not wait to recall the days and instances when his and Anwar's paths crossed.

Mohd Isa's first Anwar-induced heartache took place in 1982.

He recalled participating in a 50-motorcycle procession from Tanah Merah to Guar Kepayang, a Pas stronghold, in honour of Anwar.

He recalled his pride and joy of participating in the procession, more so at the opportunity of displaying his political prowess to his Umno rivals.

Mohd Isa was then a fervent supporter of Pas and Anwar an Islamic youth leader of the highest calibre he had ever met.

He would not mind covering himself in the dust and fumes generated by 50 motorcycles charging down unpaved roads.

Some days later, said Mohd Isa, his elation turned to horror when it was announced in Kuala Lumpur that Anwar had joined Umno.

"Mana saya nak bubuh muka saya," (Where was I to hide my face) he said

in the typical northern Malay slang.

He damned Anwar and Dr Mahathir for shattering his dream. The sense of betrayal hardened his support for Pas and from that point onward, no trees were too tall for him to climb in order to fly the Pas flags.

It took him a long time to realise that as Anwar was straddling the globe as a highly successful Umno member, he was getting nowhere with Pas.

The breaking point came in 1991 when he could no longer supply the local Pas markaz (headquarters) with rice, coffee and sugar to feed the rising tide of visiting party leaders and campaigners.

In 1995 he took the risk of being declared a murtad (apostate) and joined Umno. Today he climbs trees for the party and act as its tough guy. His dedication earned him sufficient votes to become a committee member of the Tanah Merah Umno branch.

Being an Umno member, he played by the rule. He accepted and supported Anwar because he was told Dr Mahathir wanted Anwar.

And like all loyal party members, he suffered a big heartache when Anwar was sacked.

But having been in both Umno and Pas as a grassroots member, and knowing Anwar from his childhood days, he thought he could separate myth from reality.

THERE are many Umno members like Mohd Isa, who, despite their ordinariness, are acutely aware of the goings-on in Umno, the Government and the country.

They have seen leaders come and go. Some they like, some they don't. But for as long as these people enjoy the support of the majority, they are accepted as leaders of Umno and the Government.

These are the ordinary Umno members and Malays who are most likely to make the difference in the latest move by the party to rid itself of the Anwar ghost and to rebuild its strength.

Before Umno could hope to reach out to others, it has to reach out to these loyal and hardworking members.

They will determine whether or not the party can be exorcised of the troublesome spirit and repeat its past successes in the coming general election.

Dr Mahathir's many messages to the Umno delegates will not only have to reach them but more so to be understood by them.

Mohd Isa may not have understood everything said by Dr Mahathir, but the call for unity is clear to all. Umno must stay united.

To stay united and fight its way out of the present quagmire, Umno members must be made to believe that what they are doing is correct and necessary.

This includes going on the offensive and confronting the Anwar ghost head on. There is no longer the need for apology or hesitation.

In not so many words, the Umno president was saying that if there is anybody who should feel betrayed by the events of the last nine months, it has to be him.

He was responsible for bringing Anwar into the party and supported his rise, sometimes at the expense of more senior party leaders.

And, as Dr Mahathir admitted in his address, he was naive to reject every report and warning regarding his anointed successor.

Said he: "I admit I was quite naive as I did not believe that my deputy, a person I had brought into Umno, whom I positioned in the party and Government, a person I supported to gain high position in the party and Government would try to topple me. But now, I have to believe that this was what he did. He himself admitted it."

ONLY if Umno members are willing and able to put the Anwar episode behind them will they be able to rebuild the party and reach out to others.

And reaching out they must. The beginning has been made with the admission by Dr Mahathir, his deputy Abdullah, and other senior party leaders that Umno had neglected its relationship with the youth and young professionals.

That for not wanting to disturb university students in their campuses, Umno had inadvertently left the gate open to Pas and other opposition parties.

But the problem is more complicated than that. Some Umno leaders had taken the stand literally while others used it to avoid the hassle of having to debate with students.

They know if they enter the campuses, the students will engage them in debates that they are less than prepared to face.

Yet this is the very first thing that Umno and Barisan Nasional leaders can expect to face the moment they start their forays into the campuses.

They must be prepared to be engaged by the students. They cannot expect these young people to listen and believe every word they say. They have to be convincing.

Debating and oratory skills alone are insufficient to capture their support. Rabble-rousing alone can be counter-productive and even dangerous.

There has to be substance. Their contacts with students and young professionals have to be properly structured.

Umno and the Barisan Nasional need a clearly defined youth agenda. They have not only to learn to speak and understand the language of the young, but have agendas and programmes that appeal to these groups of people.

Education and economic progress brought about by the Barisan Nasional Government are empowering our youth.

They want to be heard on such contemporary issues as the environment, freedom, transparency and accountability.

To cultivate their friendship and support, Umno and the Barisan Nasional must have clear responses to these issues.

These are among the substance of the new contract that the Government will need to enter into with this post-NEP generation in order to gain their support.

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