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Spin doctors behind Anwar's popularity

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A FEW days ago, after attending a seminar at Universiti Malaya, I was asked why some politicians are so popular with the people that whatever wrong they do seems not to jeopardise their standing.

The question apparently came up because many people at the university simply refused to believe the guilty verdict against former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

My answer is, such a perception may not be totally correct. It depends very much on who says it.

It is said if you want to hear bad things about a person, ask his enemies. Likewise, if you want to hear good things about him, ask his friends.

This is even more so with politicians. Some of them are best compared to the way we look at mountains and the moon.

From afar, they are so beautiful, so inviting. We discovered that the moon is dry and barren only when Americans Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin landed on it and sent back live television pictures in 1969.

As children, when asked by our teachers to draw or paint a scenery, our favourite choice was the mountains with the sun rising or setting. We were fascinated by them.

But if we ever moved closer to them, their colour would change from blue to green and we would begin to gain a closer perspective of their topography. They became less harmonious.

The true nature of the mountains would only be known when one tries to climb them. Their beauty and serenity would give way to hardship and dangers.

To most people, politicians are presented not in the physical form but as images and sound bytes; the way the mountains are painted by artists and the moon serenaded by poets.

Glossed over by professional image-makers and spin doctors, they are better seen as images than real people.

No other Malaysian leader is more particular about image-building than Anwar. Until this day, he still has a group of zealous image-makers working for him at home and abroad.

If fact, the building of his image started the very day Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced his entry into Umno in 1982.

The fact that he was introduced to the Press at the Prime Minister's Department and not at the Umno headquarters or elsewhere attracted considerable attention and generated wide publicity for him.

Many media people, particularly those who saw in Dr Mahathir a new hope for the country, immediately embraced Anwar as his protege and supported him in almost everything he did.

The process continued unabated until Anwar himself prevailed over his mentor in terms of media support, especially from the beginning of the 90s.

This was in part possible because Dr Mahathir literally "franchised" the local media to him.

One of Anwar's most effective operators is believed to be N.V. Raman, a former New Straits Times and Star journalist who left the country to work in the United States when the publication of the Star was temporarily banned in 1987.

Raman came back to Malaysia in 1995 and was employed by a major Chinese-

controlled conglomerate as international director but worked almost full time for Anwar.

When Anwar and several of his supporters were arrested under the Internal Security Act for their involvement in illegal assemblies and for threatening security, Raman once again left for the United States.

He is believed to be still actively lobbying for Anwar and reformasi in the United States.

History may one day judge Anwar as a victim not of a conspiracy by his enemies but of the zeal of his advisers and spin doctors.

These are the people who quoted lines from books that they picked up from Barnes and Noble and flogged them as if they were magic wands.

Most are remotely connected to Umno while a few of his non-Malay advisers were known to harbour strong anti-establishment sentiments.

IN the meantime, while the anti-Mahathir feelings among foreign media organisations is still strong, their attitude towards Anwar and his supporters seems to be changing.

Strong anti-Mahathir sentiments are not unexpected. While he does not make deliberate effort to woo foreign journalists, he often criticises them for the way they report events in Malaysia and elsewhere.

Anwar meanwhile makes it his priority to cultivate ties with foreign journalists, whether at home or when he went abroad.

The economic and political crises of the last several months offer foreign journalists a perfect opportunity to settle the score with the Prime Minister. Some did so with vengeance.

But as the dust settles and the economy shows signs of getting back on track, their views are beginning to moderate. This is seen even in the highly emotional case involving the sacking and trial of Anwar.

One example of this is found in the New York Times. While in its editorial following Anwar's guilty verdict it condemned the Prime Minister and promptly published a comment from Anwar, in another it gave a more balanced view of the event.

On April 15, the newspaper published an article written by Anwar from the Sungai Buloh prison accusing Dr Mahathir of being "a has-been leader who had descended to cruelty in a desperate bid to cling to power".

In a commentary from Kuala Lumpur by its journalist Mark Lander published on April 18, the newspaper noted that such a portrayal (of Dr Mahathir) was simplistic.

It says: "Political analysts here said Dr Mahathir mixes populist, anti-Western rhetoric with a sophisticated understanding of the global economy. Even critics credit him with fashioning a harmonious country out of a combustible mixture of Malays, ethnic Chinese and Indians."

The commentary adds: "Likewise, Mr Anwar is no hopeless victim. Analysts described him as a skilled and even ruthless politician who did not hesitate to hand out his share of plum government contracts to solidify his power base. Mr Anwar has honed his image overseas through a network of Western-style spin doctors."

THE whole world saw Chua Tian Chang aka Tian Chua, one of the vice-presidents of Parti Keadilan Nasional, trying to recreate his own Tiananmen Square protest of 1989 by sitting in front of an advancing police truck on April 14.

The world also saw Pas' and Keadilan's flags being proudly paraded in the vicinity of the Kuala Lumpur High Court on April 14 by reformasi protesters as their colleagues set Barisan Nasional flags and City Hall properties on fire.

Yet both Pas and Keadilan denied that their members were involved in the

illegal demonstration.

Keadilan president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail was reported as saying that raising Keadilan flags and wearing its badges did not mean that the rioters were supporters of her party.

"If the authorities are sure that Keadilan members were involved in the riots, it is their responsibility to prove the allegations," she said on Monday.

On the following day, Chua was taken to court and charged with taking part in an illegal assembly and attempting to obstruct police in carrying out their duties.

Still Dr Wan Azizah had the audacity to issue a Press statement to deny the involvement of her supporters in the demonstration.

Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor was less direct in denying the participation of the party's supporters in the demonstration.

He said in Alor Star that the party had never incited its supporters to do anything against the law.

This is a classic example of baling batu sembunyi tangan by Pas and Keadilan in their frail attempts to run away from responsibility.

As if the publicity her supporters received from the international media in Kuala Lumpur was insufficient and the harm they did to the stability of the country was not bad enough, Dr Wan Azizah flew to Hong Kong to be interviewed by CNN.

She told the interviewer that the Prime Minister might declare a state of emergency following street violence after Anwar's sentencing.

Such an allegation, however, is not new. Anwar's supporters had spread the same rumour at the peak of the disagreement between him and Dr Mahathir on the management of the economy last year.

While declaration of emergency should be used as a last resort, stern action against illegal protesters is a must.

The use of emergency laws must be considered only if the illegal protests pose a threat to racial and religious harmony, and the situation threatens to go out of control.

Take the incident of last Saturday night when about 500 protesters - the majority of whom were Malays - tried to march through parts of the city which are largely occupied by non-Malays like Jalan Bukit Bintang and Jalan Pudu.

The tough and prompt action by police in stopping and arresting some 90 protesters is commendable. It is dangerous to allow such a Malay crowd to march through Chinese areas.

Let us hope that the court will also act swiftly and sternly against these law-breakers. Leniency may not be appreciated by these people and prolonging the trial will only make them more determined to break the law.

In the final analysis, we cannot allow our country to go down the Indonesian road especially when there are our own people who are looking up to the bloody Indonesian reformasi for guidance and inspiration.

SIMILARLY, we should not go down the American way where the line separating democracy and anarchy is becoming blurred by the day.

More blood of innocent people is being spilled because the gun lobby is powerful and can harm the interests of politicians. Bearing arms is considered an American way.

In our country, one can go to the gallows for illegal possession of firearms, and gun ownership is strictly controlled. In the United States, there are as many gun shops as there are 7-Eleven outlets.

The mixture of easy access to firearms and the rise in racism have led to many deadly hate crimes like the one we saw on Wednesday in Littleton, Colorado.

Two heavily-armed 17- and 18-year-old boys turned a school into a killing field. Thirteen young people died in the massacre. The killers, Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, took their own lives after the rampage.

Armed with guns and racial hatred, teenage boys and girls are turning into mass murderers. Yet Americans proudly proclaimed gun ownership as a democratic right.

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