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Anwar factor fading away

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WITH much of its reform agenda captured by the present administration, the Anwar factor has receded into the shadows in the run-up to the general election, writes ROSE ISMAIL.

`FESS up: Most of us have short memories. Unless we are prodded time and again, we forget things with relative ease. And this is probably why the Anwar Ibrahim factor - a hugely significant one in the 1999 polls - is no longer on the front-burner in this general election.

While there appears to be residual sympathy for the former deputy prime minister, pollsters and political observers say he is not likely to be a major factor skewing results.

The signs are obvious. First, there is an ever-increasing number of Keadilan members crawling back into Umno.

The reason for this, some say, is obvious: with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement, the anger felt by Anwar's people has dissipated. It may have also wiped out the party's raison d'etre.

Although Keadilan president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail will insist that her party is not just a "free Anwar" operation, the creation of the party is undeniably linked to her husband's fate.

Yet another sign of internal collapse was the Feb 14 Permatang Pauh gathering in Cherok Tok' Kun. Keadilan had said 100,000 would gather for the event but a piddling 2,000 finally appeared.

Yesterday's news from the Election Commission that party vice-president Mohd Azmin Ali, Youth chief Ezam Mohd Nor and deputy Wanita chief Irene Fernandez will not qualify as candidates is a major blow to the party, but they are challenging this regardless.

Outside of this cluster of problems plaguing Keadilan, the most substantial and yet subtle reason for Anwar's diminishing influence is tied to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

As one of Anwar's close aides is reported to have said, there is nothing much left for him now that Abdullah is doing the very things that Anwar had promised to do.

The FreeAnwar campaign (FAC) website states that Anwar's struggle is to build a just society and a nation guided by the fundamental principles of the Federal Constitution.

Among the many objectives listed by the FAC is to establish an independent commission to re-examine all laws curtailing the people's rights and to eliminate those provisions that are contrary to such rights.

Observers say the recent formation of the Royal Commission on the Police Force by Abdullah comes close to this.

That there are NGO and opposition party representatives in the commission also speaks well of Abdullah's effort to solve police-related problems.

Abdullah has also taken over another of Anwar's repeatedly-stated fights: corruption.

Polls conducted in recent weeks indicate that people are generally pleased with the arrest of high-profile individuals and others on charges of corruption.

Abdullah's religious credibility - seen as genuine by many - also neutralises Anwar's carefully cultivated image as a modern Muslim leader, a champion of the Islamic and developing world.

As the aide reportedly said: "Now, what can Anwar offer that the PM is

not already offering and doing for the people?"

Former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam gives another plausible reason for Anwar's waning influence.

His international image may have been dented somewhat by Sept 11, says Musa.

In the West especially, where there appears to be a dogged obsession about establishing a link between militancy and Muslim leaders, Anwar may have been lumped together with honourable and dubious characters, says another political observer.

Despite all this, Anwar remains on the radar screen for a good number of Malaysians, which suggests that he will be a long-haul issue.

"Don't forget," says Dr Sharon Siddique, a political scientist and keen observer of Malaysian politics, "in his earlier career, Anwar was a grassroots man; someone who led the march in Baling and was thrown into jail for defending the poor and marginalised.

"These people may not have identified with him in his later career as deputy prime minister but they would remember the folk hero of 1974."

If young people are giving him a moderately high rating in the polls, Siddique says it may be due to his role as a student leader.

Ibrahim Suffian, of Merdeka Center, a social research organisation, says the Anwar factor may no longer be Anwar himself. Instead, he may be used as a vehicle for other concerns. He said Anwar could be used as "the currency of doubt against the establishment".

Ibrahim, who conducts opinion polls, says his data reveal that while people acknowledge Abdullah's hard work and effort, they feel corruption may be too ingrained.

As such, even though Abdullah is seen to be personally serious about what he is doing, many people worry that bureaucratic inertia may slow him down.

Dr Mansor Mohamad Noor, a Universiti Utara Malaysia sociologist, said data from Kedah reveal that a moderately high percentage of Malays continue to give some degree of importance to Anwar.

He explains this by stating that the velocity of change differs markedly between rural and urban settings.

"Change is much slower in rural areas," he says. "Perhaps this is why Anwar may still be a pertinent issue in such areas whereas he has almost become a non-issue in urban centres."

Interestingly enough, Mansur's polls reveal that many Malays want Abdullah to solve the Anwar problem, an indication that the former is seen to have the courage and conviction to sort out one of the most fractious issues facing the nation in recent times.