

Student rebel, DPM, opposition leader
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If the 1998 political crisis had not happened, Anwar Ibrahim would have been the fifth prime minister of Malaysia.
MCPX

If not for Dr Mahathir Mohamad's forced removal, Anwar would not have founded Parti Keadilan Rakyat to oppose Umno.

If not for the restriction of the law placed on him, Anwar would have become a member of parliament after the 2008 general election instead of fighting today's by-election to reclaim his old seat of Permatang Pauh.

It is the 'ifs' that has characterised the political fate of Anwar, a man who has made headlines in his colourful political career.

The story of Anwar is not just another tale, but a tale of rebellion against the establishment.

Born on Aug 10, 1948 in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Anwar was brought into a family whose steps trod the field of politics. His parents, though not star-studded political figures, were nevertheless active Umno members.

Anwar's father, once member of parliament for Seberang Jaya Tengah (later renamed Permatang Pauh), was Health Ministry's parliamentary secretary, while his mother was a division chief in Wanita Umno, and his brother, Rani, the chairman of Malaysian Youth Council and an active party member.

old photos of anwar ibrahim 260808 01His first foray into politics began when he entered Universiti Malaya in 1967 as a Malay Literature undergraduate. In the following year, he became the chairman of the university's Malay Literature Society and the Malaysian Muslim Student Association, effectively becoming a renowned student leader.

After the May 13 racial clashes, Anwar began to ponder on the need of social restructuring through religion. At this time, Anwar and Mahathir shared the same view - that the first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman failed to elevate the economic and educational status of the Malays. Thus, Anwar looked up to Mahathir as his mentor, a symbol of strength for the coming change.

When Mahathir was sacked from Umno after May 13, 1969, Anwar stood beside him and championed his call of reforms. And when Mahathir's influential 'The Malay Dilemma' was banned by Tunku's administration, Anwar braved the dictates of the day and pushed forward Mahathir's seminal work, brandishing it akin to Lin Biao's support of Mao Zedong during the Chinese Cultural Revolution beginning from 1966.

Anwar's rebelliousness can be gleaned from the following tale: In 1971, when Anwar's father presented him to Tun Razak during the latter's birthday, Anwar was suggested to further his education overseas as a legal student after graduating from Universiti Malaya, in order to contribute to the nation in the coming years. Anwar declined the offer, as well as the opportunity to join Umno at that time so as to remain free from political control as a

champion of Islam.

However, Anwar did not decline the invitation to participate in the United Nations Youth Conference, and became the chairman of Malaysian Youth Council and a member of the United Nations Youth Conference advisory panel in the following year. From then on, Tun Razak began to notice Anwar's rise, in no small part due to his founding of Abim (Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement).

Though Abim was only registered in 1974 as a formal society, it was already an active entity when it was founded in 1971, fighting for the rights of lower-class Malays in their educational needs. The aim was to expand Abim's influence in pushing for Islamic reforms by recruiting more young people under the banner of education. With this exercise, Anwar had cemented himself as a charismatic leader amongst the Malay youth.

With his newfound influence, Anwar participated with students from Universiti Malaya in the hunger strike at Baling in 1974, forcing the government to arrest him under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Only two years later - in September 1976 - was Anwar released unconditionally by the administration of Tun Hussein Onn. Prior to his release, Anwar was offered a conditional release by the Tun Razak's administration, of which he flatly rejected.

old photo of anwar ibrahim riding a trshaw with his children 190808After his release, Anwar did not seek leadership appointment from his mentor Mahathir, whose return to Umno in 1971 paved way for his then appointment, first as the education minister after the 1974 general election, and later as the deputy prime minister in 1976. Instead, his experience in jail gave him the experience to lead Abim again, to the point that the organisation was at odds with the government in opposing corruption, abuse of power and the abolishment of ISA.

In 1980, in the midst of pressing for reforms, Anwar married his beloved Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, of which their devotion was publicly displayed later when she took up the mantle of leadership and preserved his spirit of reforms during Anwar's trying times in the late 90s.

The Islamic reforms

The year 1981 was a turning point for Anwar Ibrahim, representing his second stage in his political career and maturity. It was during this year that he joined Umno at the behest of his mentor Mahathir, the then prime minister. His entry was met with caution from Umno veterans, and with scepticism from PAS (due to the Islamic party's failure in inviting Anwar to its leadership). But he had the support of his wife and the blessings of his family, as well as Abim's full backing.

anwar mahathir whispersAnd thus, began his meteoric rise in Umno. The reason Anwar was lavished with much attention was due in no small part to the support he received from his 50,000-odd Abim members. He also gave Mahathir the necessary well of strength to push through his political agenda.

To prove Anwar's leadership and charisma, the new Umno member was deliberately picked by Mahathir to contest in the Permatang Pau constituency in the 1982 general election. This move was more of a test: to prove Anwar's capabilities, as well as to silence the critics of Umno veterans in letting an inexperienced young man to rise to the leadership echelon.

And indeed Anwar passed the test, thus began the alliance between Mahathir and himself, paving the way for Mahathir to initiate his Islamic reforms in the administration of the nation.

Mahathir believed that the Islamisation of the administration will initiate the necessary reforms, and with this, Anwar found the chance at last to carry out his ideals of Islamic reforms in the government. Together, Islamisation was successfully introduced and penetrated every facade of the administration.

old photos of anwar ibrahim 260808 04The Islamisation during Mahathir's administration, and the ideals of Anwar, was founded on similar grounds, that values were flexible, not rigid, enabling Malaysia to develop its own model similar to Middle Eastern modernisation, instead of being restricted by the example of Turkey. Incidentally, the administrations under Tunku, Razak and Hussein Onn were based on the Turkish model. Coincidentally too, Tun Hussein Onn and his father Onn Jaafar were both of Turkish descent.

The root of such an ideal was based on the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which saw the demise of the Shah and the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty by the country's Islamic revolutionists. The overthrow of the Shah was not only the pride of the Shiites; it inspired the Sunnis to pursue reforms and change, with Malaysia a prime example of such an inspiration.

Thus history witnessed the alliance between Mahathir and Anwar during the 1980s, pushing Islamic agenda into the mainstream, while regaining good relations with Middle Eastern states and strengthening ties with Western nations. It was a time where East meets West, where Malaysia strived to absorb the industrial and technological prowess of our Western counterpart, while levelling Eastern values as the soul of the nation, displacing conventional Western mindset which had dominated the country since its colonisation.

The criticisms levelled at the West during the latter half of Mahathir's administration and the promotion of Eastern values by Anwar was seen as the culmination of this amalgamation, a measure to show the Muslim world what it takes to be a successful Islamic nation.

However, this period was not spared from internal frictions, due to mismanagement and the difficulty in accepting Islamic values as universal values by local non-Muslims.

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