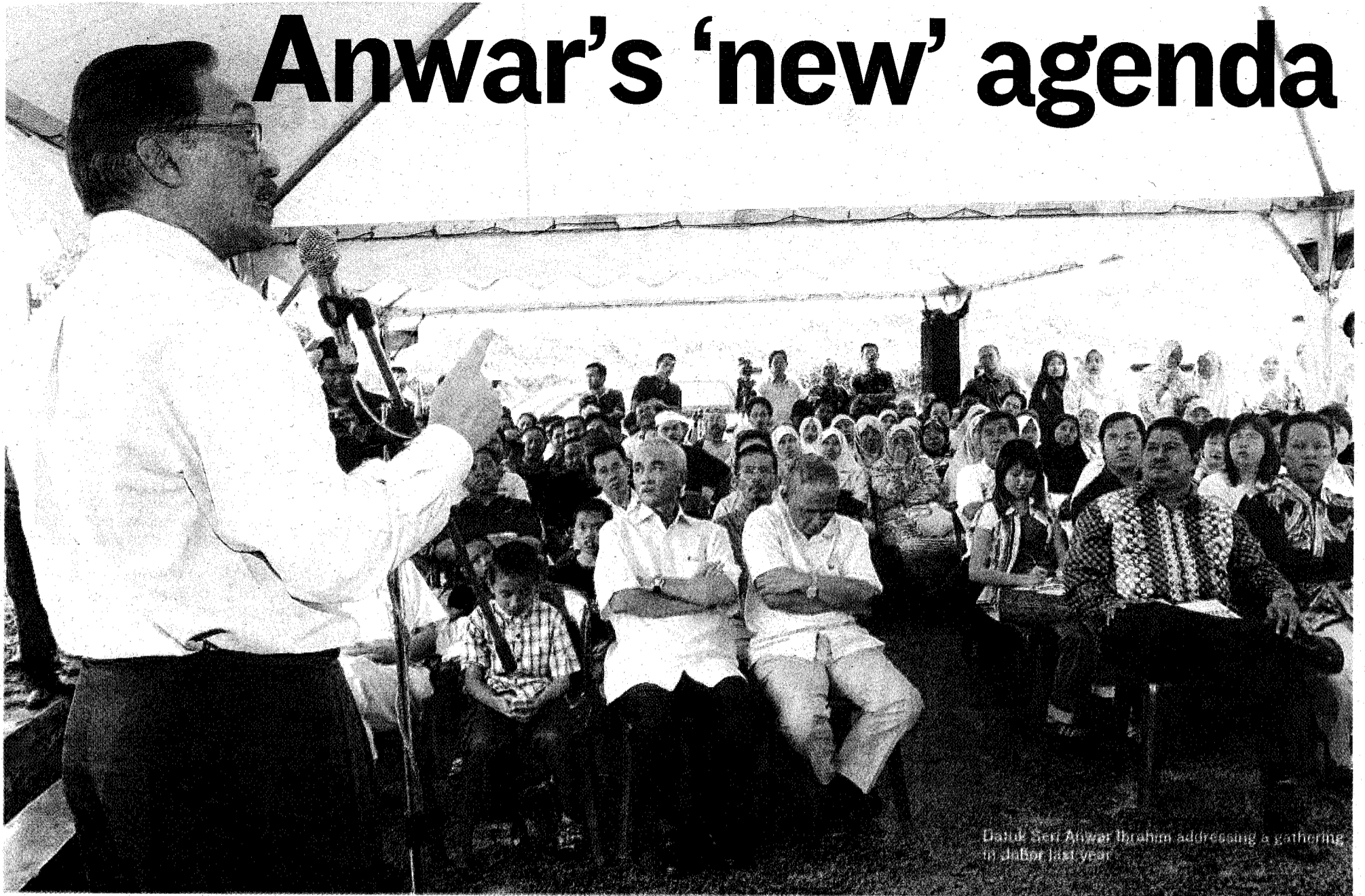


Anwar's 'new' agenda



Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim addressing a gathering in Jabor last year

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It had been drizzling earlier at a small kampung at Hulu Langat, Selangor, yet the roadsides are full of parked cars. Around 300 people, standing round a soggy, muddy field, roar in approval as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim declares "Lawan tetap lawan! (We will keep on fighting!)."

Anwar has been accused of being a chameleon, tailoring his message to suit his listeners. But here he is, railing against the New Economic Policy (NEP), the Holy Grail of Malay politics, with a predominantly rural Malay crowd at a *ceramah* organised by Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, or the People's Justice Party).

At various *ceramahs* up and down the country, Anwar has plenty of hot issues – and is drawing crowds of thousands (between 5,000 and 20,000, say PKR sources). In the past two years he has been saying that the NEP "has become a gimmick" to subvert wealth "to leaders, their families and their cronies."

And last week on Al-Jazeera, he said that the NEP policy of giving a discount to rich Malays to buy RM1mil homes "just doesn't make sense".

In an interview with this writer at his home in Bukit Damansara, Kuala Lumpur (he has since moved to a new home in Segambut), Anwar, dressed in a short sleeved shirt and denim pants, is relaxed, friendly and thoughtful.

He tells me that Malaysia's economic policy can no longer be governed by the "racial card".

This is because the policy should firstly be "about propelling the economy, making sure we succeed, being competitive. Otherwise we will lose investor confidence and foreign investments".

As he elaborates on his web page: "In the 1970s and 1980s our peers were Singapore, Taiwan and Korea – they are now far ahead of us. China and India have emerged as economic giants. We are now losing out to Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand."

After being sacked from the Government and Umno in 1998, he exchanged his plush black Mercedes of the Deputy Prime Minister's post for the bleak Black Maria that took him to controversial court trials and six years in prison. What drives Anwar Ibrahim now?

He adds that Malaysia, once ranked fourth globally by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad) in terms of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), has slipped to 62nd place.

His NEP comments actually sound pretty similar to what the DAP and NGOs like Aliran have been saying for years. It's an interesting development coming from a man who was the former DPM and Finance Minister.

Since his release from prison in September 2004, when the Federal Court quashed his conviction for sodomy, Anwar has been one busy man. After surgery and rest, he took up positions at various universities including Oxford, Johns Hopkins and Georgetown, Washington DC.

He has also been busy networking with top leaders from India, Tanzania, Indonesia and other countries. Britain's *Sunday Times* says that Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown and former Hong Kong governor Chris Patten are "among his friends". Last July, he was in Brisbane, Australia, at the World Shakespeare Congress giving a lecture on the bard, whose works he has read several times while in jail, he says.

His name was also touted last year as a possible Asian "moderate" Muslim candidate to replace Kofi Annan as UN secretary-general. But he declined, claiming it might compromise him speaking out strongly on issues like Iraq.

'Newspeak'

After resigning from Georgetown University last December, Anwar returned home full-time to enter local politics. Early this year he called for the lowering of petrol prices (due to soaring Petronas profits and burdensome inflation) as PKR was organising anti-toll protests.

In the past three months, he has been mak-

ing some colourful claims about the Mongolian model murder mystery. Currently, he has been nominated by most PKR divisions for the president's post (now held by his wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail) for party elections in May, in a move to silence talk of him returning to Umno.

Now that he opposes the NEP, does he support meritocracy, I ask him?

"Certainly. I fail to understand why Malay leaders have become so apologetic about it," he responds. "It is shameful to claim to be a Malay leader and not talk of meritocracy (as it would mean) the Malays are not competent, not qualified. The Malays who come from good schools are able to compete (with other races). If you don't believe in meritocracy, that means you believe in mediocrity, purely racial qualifications."

However, Anwar's definition of meritocracy also includes affirmative action, albeit on a non-racial basis.

"Meritocracy also means giving due opportunities to those who are poor and marginalised from all races. Scholarships and loans should be given out based on ability or need. If we give things based on race, too often the benefits are robbed by a few."

"Billions have been taken by the elite few through contracts, privatisation and share allocations in the name of the NEP. All these have not benefited the poor Malays. Even as a Malay, I can't accept that so how can a Chinese or Indian?"

Was this statement skewed just for the ears of a Chinese journalist from an English newspaper?

After all, Saifulbahri Kamaruddin, a journalist of more than 20 years, in a letter to *Malaysiakini* observed: "Very often I covered Anwar's functions, especially involving Umno Youth and Abim (Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia). I had never heard of one speak

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»If you don't believe in meritocracy, that means you believe in mediocrity, purely racial qualifications«

ANWAR IBRAHIM

with so much disdain of the Chinese before. We, the journalists, knew that Anwar was trying to be all things to all people, so when he addressed 'kampung' people with a skewed view, he would tell them what they wanted to hear."

Yet, by 1993, as Deputy Prime Minister, he was famously saying (and even writing the Chinese characters): "*Wo men dou shih yi jia ren* (we are one family)".

Was he merely being an image-conscious politician? Why did he support the NEP so vociferously during the 1970s in his youth?

In the latest issue of *Aliran* magazine, he says Malay activists of his generation were "very insecure" of the economic and professional status of the race. Now, due to its abuses, he advocates a New Economic Agenda.

And in an interview with Indonesia's *Tempo* magazine in December, he admits that in the past, he had tried "the softer way" until he ended up "compromising too much sometimes". Now he says, "I choose a clear agenda."

So has the chameleon disappeared after his trials and tribulations? Listen to his Hulu Langat *ceramah*:

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"The Indian Institute of Technology is one of the best in the world. Their professors are solid. Here, our academics write *sajak* (poetry) to *bodek* (bootlick). And our undergrads are told not to criticise. Our universities are not even in the Top 100 of the world.

"It is not wrong if there is a smart Chinese or Indian to lead some of our universities. I am not scared even though I am speaking in front of a Malay crowd here."

When I quiz him about the claim by some Penang Umno leaders that the state government is "not doing enough" for the Malays, he replies:

"What about Kedah? Poverty in Sik and Baling is one of the worst in the country yet the Menteri Besar is Malay. Why pick on the Chief Minister of Penang because he is Chinese?"

He adds, "There should be a programme in Penang to help all the poor and marginalised people, regardless of race."

Anwar laments that during the Umno general assembly last year, racial tensions were raised while fundamental economic and social problems such as poverty, the 100,000 unemployed graduates and inflation were hardly discussed.

He believes that multi-racial political parties, such as PKR, are the way forward towards "national maturity".

"It takes a lot of effort. But we cannot continue with segments of the population, the non-Malays or even some Malays, feeling that they are second class citizens," he says.

On Al-Jazeera last week, when a caller claimed that the NEP has marginalised the Indians, for instance, Anwar replied:

"You are right.... That is why the NEP should be dismantled and we all come together as Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans and Kadazans. This country has enough resources to benefit all."

More forcefully, at a *ceramah* in Kuala Berang, Terengganu, last month, he said, "The keris is for true Malay warriors to defend justice and fight oppression, not for people to enrich themselves and defend corruption. We reject that kind of keris."

But can the Malays accept his rather radical message?

He candidly told *Aliran*: "Many of my friends, Malay professionals, had advised me, 'Look Anwar, you are venturing into a very dangerous sort of battle and many Malays cannot take it.'"

"I told them, 'Look in the civil service, the congestion in hospitals (like the one) in Seberang Jaya (Penang). Who suffers most? The poor Malays, Chinese and Indians.'"

"I have addressed predominantly Malay crowds and I said I am not going to sacrifice the Malay position or interests. I am a Malay and I am also responsible. But I am also a Malaysian and I believe a Malaysian economic agenda will ensure the success of the Malays, Chinese and other communities."

Azmin Ali, his long-time political secretary and current vice-president of PKR, thinks the Malays are seeing the bigger picture.

"Initially, it was difficult to convince the Malays as the NEP has been indoctrinated in their mindset. But they are now more aware that the NEP has been hijacked. Some of them receive RM50 or some batik cloth to work as supporters. Yet, just compare their humble homes with, say, (Selangor state councillor) Datuk Zakaria's palace (in Klang)," he says.

Or as another political activist comments:

"If the DAP says it, the Malays will reject it. But if Anwar says it, the Malays will listen because he can quote Quranic verses to support it. Racism is not part of Islam."

But is Anwar afraid that he and PKR will be seen as leaning too much towards non-Malays?

At his *ceramah* in Bandar Tun Razak, KL, early this year, the ever-eloquent Anwar told a huge crowd, "Umno Youth calls me a traitor to the Malays for being pro-Chinese and pro-Indian because I question the NEP. No, I am pro-*rakyat*. The real traitors are those who rob from the poor Malays."

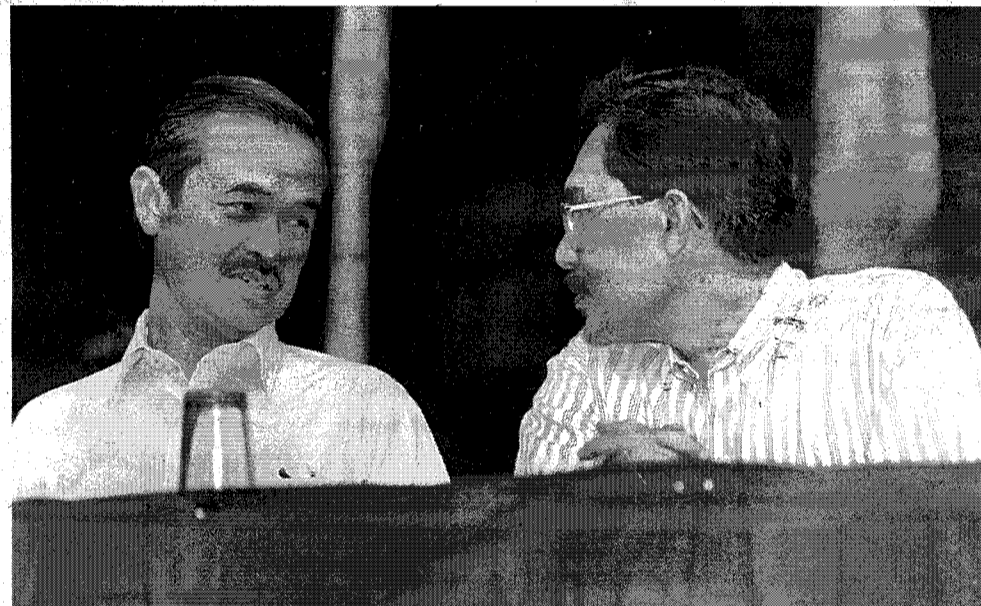
His tainted past?

It all sounded good, but I had to throw the big question at Anwar: "Yes, now you're talking of reforms but what did you do when you were in power?"

"It's a fair question. I was part of the system



Then and now. Anwar chatting with Pak Lah in 1991 (left) when he was in the Government. With DAP leader Lim Kit Siang (above) at a forum on the Malaysian economy in January this year.



»If the DAP says it, the Malays will reject it. But if Anwar says it, the Malays will listen«

POLITICAL ACTIVIST

then and I supported it," he admits.

Obviously, as part of Umno and the Government from 1982 till 1998, he supported the NEP. And surely, he could not have been blind to what he is railing against now – how the NEP has been used for political patronage.

When asked what were his proudest reforms as Deputy PM, Anwar is less forceful and eloquent. Nevertheless, he points out that he did push for public housing programmes.

"Just to have one public housing programme, I had to call the Menteri Besar personally and push for it," he recalls. "Only then did they start moving. Something is wrong with the system."

"Even though the country was doing well economically (before the financial crash of 1997), I had to push with special funds from Bank Negara. But there were lots of funds for mega projects. Why? Because there are a lot of 'easy returns' for mega projects."

Anwar adds that he also put in place tougher anti-corruption laws (allowing prosecution of Ministers even after leaving office) when he was Acting PM for two months in 1997 (when Dr Mahathir Mohamad was on leave).

"Can you name me who in the entire

Cabinet supported the tougher ACA laws? It was very, very unpopular with many Ministers," he claims.

In addition, he underlines that he was the only Minister who publicly spoke out (in Parliament) for the Internal Security Act to be amended to make it less draconian. And the Cabinet Committee on Management, which he headed, looked into billions of losses and met "much resistance".

Did he question any of the "mega projects"?

He says he was not opposed to Putrajaya *per se*, but to the "manner and speed" of its implementation.

"We spent billions on Cyberjaya. But the MSC has not really taken off because we were more focused on the construction of buildings rather than building the human resources. Our problem is this delusion of grandeur which does not generate income."

"India has surpassed us in IT – just look at Bangalore. When I met with (Indian PM) Manmohan Singh last November, I was told their government spent only US\$30mil (RM102mil) on their version of Cyberjaya."

And he points out that when he was Finance Minister, despite the "big debate" within the civil service about the position of Treasury secretary-general, he appointed a non-Malay, Tan Sri Clifford Herbert, due to his ability and integrity.

Since January, he has been telling the public that he refused to raise the toll rates, despite political lobbying, when he was Deputy PM.

"The month after I was sacked, the tolls were raised," he says.

Anwar is acutely aware of public doubts over his integrity. To counter that, he has thrown bold challenges at his *ceramahs*. At the Bandar Tun Razak gathering, for instance, he declared:

"Set up an independent commission to investigate all past and present Ministers. See if I have taken one share, one inch of land, one piece of timber or one contract. That kind of money is *haram*!"

And in Kuala Berang, Trengganu, last month, he said:

"If I wanted things easy, I would not have gone to prison. Some people said I was stupid. Just support (Tun) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) and I would have become PM."

At the Umno general assembly of 1998, as Anwar's allies were preparing to assail Dr Mahathir on the KKN (the Malay acronym for cronyism, corruption and nepotism) issue, the latter took the wind out of their sails by releasing a so-called "complete list" of all recipients of government contracts, tenders, etc – many of whom were figures thought to be associated with Anwar.

As a disillusioned ex-leader of PKR says, "Well, personally he may not have taken any money, but his associates had to build a support base and probably did."

He also claims that the 1993 Umno election campaign (when Anwar ousted Tun Ghafar Baba as Deputy President) set the worst record (at that time) for money politics.

The ex-leader also mentions that Anwar supported the 1987 episode of having non-Mandarin educated headmasters transferred to Chinese schools as well as the 1988 sacking of Lord President Tun Salleh Abas.

"Now he goes round talking of human rights and all that. Ha ha, come on."

And what about his image as a firebrand on Malay-Muslim issues in his younger days?

Anwar says, in our interview, that the way Pas projected its Islamic state was "ill-advised" even though the party deserves credit for – "quite remarkably" – giving land to Chinese temples and schools.

He adds that, in a democracy, Pas is free to espouse what it wants.

"But I made quite clear to them, in the context of a multi-racial society, it is better not to talk in terms of labels. When I ask them about freedom of expression, independence of the judiciary, fair economic policy and clean government, they say yes to all. So I say, why confuse all these things with the Islamic state slogan?"

Anwar has also taken a moderate, middle-of-the-road line on controversies such as the Moorthy conversion case. He says Article 121(A) of the Constitution was drawn up to respect the rights of Muslims in the syariah

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A humbled and changed man?

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courts.

"But once it infringes on the rights of non-Muslims, they have the right to question. 121(A) is not meant to block Christians, Buddhists and Hindus from going to the civil court. For me, there is no problem," says Anwar.

He does not think that stopping discussions, for fear of religious sensitivities, is the solution. However, any discussion has to be done in a mutually respectful manner.

When asked about the closing down of the Article 11 (freedom of religion) forums organised by NGOs, he replies:

"I met the ulama in Shah Alam, and I told them, why should we be defensive? Even views perceived to be wrong should be allowed (because) it's like the meritocracy argument: Let's have the courage and confidence to counter them."

Trust his promises?

As part of the lingering mistrust towards him, there have been persistent rumours that he will rejoin Umno - despite his persistent denials and despite Umno itself passing a resolution (shortly after his release in 2004) barring his re-entry.

Anwar has admitted that he was initially more conciliatory towards Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. In a February 2005 interview with *Off the Edge*, he said that Pak Lah: "genuinely believes there is something wrong with the system, that corruption is endemic... I do believe that given the constraints of the present system, he is still the best bet if anything is to be done. But it has to be done now!"

Since then, his tone on Umno has been increasingly strident. Now he says more than three years have passed since Pak Lah's administration began and the signs, such as corruption, are not encouraging.

If Anwar ever became Prime Minister, what would he do?

In the *Tempo* interview, he said his agenda includes:

»He was part of the system, no doubt, but he was twice its victim as well«

KHOO BOO TEIK

increasing economic competitiveness, abolishing the ISA, freeing up the mass media, reforming the judiciary and fighting corruption.

As for his economic policy, Anwar has told *Aliran* magazine that he believes in the free market and economic growth but it must be a "humane economy" with social justice - not the kind of liberalisation which "allows some to privatise in order to pirate."

He says he believes in Keynesian economic "pump-priming" - not in the manner done by Dr Mahathir with wasteful mega projects, but rather through education and public health programmes.

"You can see the packed hospital in Seberang Jaya - spend an hour there, it's pathetic."

Steven Gan, *Malaysiakini's* editor-in-chief, says this about Anwar being part of crony politics:

"There are definitely a lot of skeletons in his closet, for instance, in terms of cronyism and his ambition to be PM. I think it would help (for him) to tell, in an unmistakable way to everybody, that he's a changed man, that he's learnt his lesson."

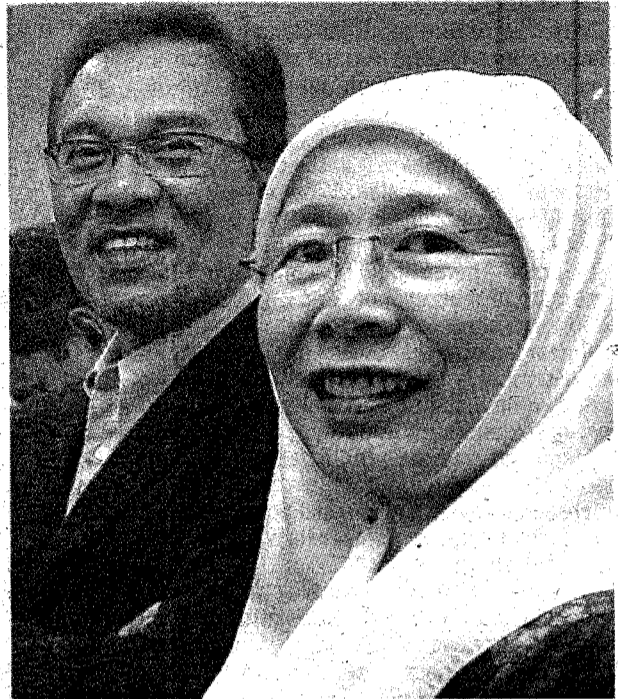
"In fact before he joined Umno (in 1982) he actually said that entering the party to reform it was like cleaning a septic tank from the inside. And yet, he joined."

"I think Anwar is a flawed man, but so are top Umno leaders. As a journalist, I would like to see more checks and balances in our system including a strong opposition. Anwar, flawed as he is, can play an important role in building that."

Is he sincere?

"Very few politicians are," says Gan. "But I believe Anwar has changed... Spending four years in prison and going through the kind of humiliation meted out to him would have a dramatic impact in anyone's life."

So, is Anwar sorry about his past actions in Umno? When this writer asks him twice about any deep personal transformation since his sacking, he sidesteps the questions. Perhaps it is too much to expect the consummate



Anwar owes much to his wife, Datin Seri Dr Azizah Ismail, who has stood steadfastly by him through his trials and tribulations.

politician to confess to any wrongdoings while in power, or to some sort of life-changing epiphany in prison. However, at a ceramah at Bota, Parit, Perak, last August, Anwar related:

"They were bringing the mattress up and down, up and down in court. There I was sitting in the dock with my wife and five daughters behind me. And they would say, 'Here, here and there are the sperm stains.' It was a test from Allah. Others told me, *padan muka* (serves you right), why did you join Umno? But I have no regrets. I tried to reform it from within."

"The people of Parit here supported me during all the Umno elections. From Youth chief to deputy president. I have not forgotten your *jasa* (kind deeds). But why did you support me? To steal APs, logs and contracts? Or to help the poor?"

His wife, Dr Wan Azizah, says:

"Anwar has deep reserves of patience, resilience and humility, and those qualities saw him through the ordeal of six years' solitary confinement."

"He has changed in that he is now more aware of who his real friends are. As the saying goes, it is only in winter when you know which tree is evergreen."

Political analyst Khoo Boo Teik, who explores these issues in the book *Beyond Mahathir*, says:

"I don't really know how he has changed since then, I'd like to know. Few politicians who come within reach of real power are humble. It's important that Anwar realises that the common people stood by him when he suffered injustice, unlike the corporate and political elite who flattered him only when he was in power."

Can Anwar be trusted on his reform promises? Khoo adopts a very practical approach.

"It's futile to discuss character or personal integrity. Anwar has reasons for wanting political reforms. He was part of the system, no doubt, but he was twice its victim as well. To what extent Anwar will push reforms depends critically on public demands, political support and compelling socio-economic conditions."

However, Ong Kian Ming, another political analyst, thinks that Anwar will be compelled to deliver.

"He has put himself in the international limelight now and it'll be very difficult for him to renege on his promises of press and political freedoms. Anwar is someone who really cares about his reputation domestically and internationally. After associating with and comparing himself to the likes of Nelson Mandela, it'll be difficult for him not to stick to at least some of his promises of reform."

Anwar may be on the comeback trail but few people give PKR and the Opposition any realistic chance of winning the next general election, or any general election in the foreseeable future. And if he can't win high public office, he won't be able to deliver on any promise.

However, if Anwar, who is only 60, remains sincere and true to his newfound cause, his strongest contribution to nation-building could be his bold pronouncements on multi-racialism. If a significant Malay leader can say all that, it may just transform the spirit of local politics for the future.