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The icon of youth activism

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Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim turned 69 on Aug 10. But he had to celebrate his birthday in the Sungai Buloh prison because he is serving a five-year sentence, to me, as a political detainee. I joined his wife Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, his family members and hundreds of his supporters to celebrate the occasion outside the prison that evening. We brought birthday cakes, made speeches, read poetry and sang together.

The crowd was bigger this time around with a considerable number of students and young people. "He still has that aura among the youth," I thought to myself.

Before it was my turn to speak, the stage was given to student activist Anis Syafiqah, who is leading the #TangkapMO1 demonstration at Dataran Merdeka on Aug 27. She was articulate in arguing how unjust it was that Anwar, who had fought for the people, had to endure imprisonment while Malaysian Offi-

cial 1 was safe from any punishment.

That night's setting and the fact that the UN International Youth Day was two days down the road (on Aug 12) prompted me to speak about Anwar's days as a student and youth activist.

I was first introduced to Anwar in 1975 when he was imprisoned under the Internal Security Act because of his involvement in a demonstration in support of impoverished farmers in Baling, Kedah. He was president of the Malaysian Youth Council and Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) at the time.

We were excited when we were informed that Anwar was a student — and an active one — of the Malay College Kuala Kangsar. He furthered his studies at Universiti Malaya from 1968 to 1971 and was president of the UM Malay Language Society (PBMUM). At the time, PBMUM was the leading student's platform besides the UM Student Union. Around the same time, he was president of the National

Union of Malaysian Muslim Students. In 1971, he co-founded ABIM.

Anwar played a pivotal role in injecting a fighting spirit into the student movement on campus and providing society with a unique kind of leadership both at the national and international levels.

He was known for his fierce convictions and daring actions that were guided by his idealism to make things better, an activism that knew no boundaries and was highly intellectual. His favourite mottos — which reflected genuine comprehension, direction and plan of action, for example "strengthening the Malay language, literature and culture", "the rising tide of Islam", "conscience of the society", "agent of change", "the rich become richer while the poor become poorer" and "upholding truth and justice" — resonated with the students, youth and society at large.

He championed the use of the national language as a medium of instruction in univer-



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BY
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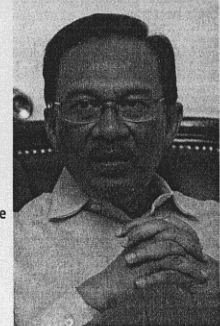
sities, fought against corruption, demanded that the University and University College Act be amended so that students were free to join politics and led non-governmental organisations against the government's proposal to tighten the Societies Act that would suppress the voice of the people. He was already a national figure then.

Anwar was also making waves in the international arena. From 1975 to 1982, he was the Asia-Pacific representative for the World Assembly

of Muslim Youth. In 1970/71, he attended a UN World Youth Assembly in New York. This was followed by him serving on the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Panel on Youth.

Anwar showed his capacity as a prospective democrat by his articulation on the three principles of being democratic, truly representative and independent. When he became involved with the International Institute of Islamic Thought, he was already preparing for what he later became — an intellectual moderate and progressive Islamic leader. But he was equally known as someone who actively promoted religious tolerance and harmony among people from diverse racial and religious groups.

As a young activist, Anwar was known for his fierce convictions and daring actions that were guided by his idealism to make things better, an activism that knew no boundaries and was highly intellectual



To Anwar, knowledge and education were premium. As a student, he pioneered an awareness campaign to elevate the education level of students in the rural areas and among the urban poor. Upon graduating, he established Yayasan Anda Akademik, a charitable private secondary school aimed at providing students from poor families a second chance. He published two magazines: *Potensi* for SPM and *Diskusi* for STPM students. He also published sociopolitical magazine, *Panji Masyarakat*.

Anwar championed integrated modern Islamic education, starting at kindergarten. Hundreds of Tasli ABIM were established. This was later followed with SERI and SEMI (Islamic primary and secondary schools). Today, ABIM runs a college called Dar al-Hikmah.

Anwar is an icon of youth activism. Until today, the youth are at the centre of his mind. He knows that his success depends on his successors. This is why his party lines up a good number of young members of parliament and state assemblymen.

Thus, it is befitting that we dedicate the International Youth Day 2016 to Anwar. ■

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