

Anwar's Political Mutation

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THERE might not have been a massive sensational homecoming for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

According to Press reports, there were about 500 well-wishers waiting for him at the KL International Airport (KLIA) and another 1,000 at his Damansara home when he returned from Munich on Oct 31.

The former Deputy Prime Minister had gone to the German city to seek treatment for his back problem on Sept 4 soon after being released from prison.

The media estimates can, of course, be questioned. The Press is not for him – not anymore. That, of course, wasn't the case when he was the crown prince of Umno and the anointed successor to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the 1990s.

Back then, the Press was essentially under his control. The segments that weren't were held under his spell.

But the credit for that must go to Anwar himself. He personally cultivated the Press, from the editors down to beat reporters.

Thus, while his ambitious and brash political and media operators might have, from time to time, offended the Press, his personal relationship with the journalists and editors remained good.

The subdued homecoming could be the combination of Anwar's own deliberate plan not to attract too much attention and the very visible police presence at the

airport several days before his Sunday return.

It proved to be a good move. The public was not unnecessarily alarmed. Umno and the Government were not forced to react negatively and Anwar still enjoyed visible media coverage.

Has Anwar mellowed? Some would say yes, while others would say it was a tactical move. An emotionally charged homecoming at a very public place like the KLIA might not have been good for Anwar.

It could have been seen as an act of defiance and a sign of ungratefulness. It is still fresh in the memory of many people how Anwar had his international passport speedily renewed with the help of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin.

An ordinary mortal is unlikely to enjoy such speedy bureaucratic treatment. Anwar is, of course, not an ordinary mortal.

Despite six years of incarceration and expulsion from Umno, Anwar remains an extraordinary person. No matter what one's personal feeling is towards this Penang-born 'renaissance man', the fact remains that he is a charmer. He can still cast a spell on many people.

So, it wasn't a belligerent homecoming reminiscent of the 1998 *reformasi* demonstrations at the National Mosque and Dataran Merdeka.

But that should not be mistakenly

construed as the end of Anwar's era and his extraordinary charm. As he openly declared at his homecoming press conference, he would continue with his *reformasi* agenda and would love to meet the Prime Minister.

ANWAR: PAST & PRESENT

AT THE risk of offending readers' sensitivities and being accused of opening old wounds, I think a discussion on Anwar's future is important on several counts.

Firstly, if we believe the media spin, we are supposed to be living in a freer and kinder era. Such an environment is favourable to Anwar's *reformasi* agenda.

The Prime Minister himself reinforced this point in his interview with *New Sunday Times* to commemorate his one-year in office when he said he didn't mind criticism, adding that responsible criticism is good and should be encouraged.

Secondly, having watched Anwar's political transformation from a rebellious student leader to an establishment man on that eventful day in March 1982 when he formally joined Umno, I think we will continue to hear from him for a long time to come.

At 57, he is still young and there is no reason why he would want to fade away. Whether as a student leader at Universiti Malaya, as the charismatic Islamic Youth

Movement (Abim) President, as the ringleader of farmers' demonstrations or as Mahathir's Youth Chief, Anwar has his agenda set.

His political mutation is a continuing process. When he abandoned Abim in favour of Umno in the days running up to the 1982 general election, I wrote to suggest that the 'X factor' in Malay-Muslim politics had been erased.

I contended that without Anwar at the helm, Abim could not continue to become the 'X factor' in Malay-Muslim politics.

In fact, Abim suffered a major setback when its politically inclined members traded their Islamic missionary fervour for positions in Umno and Pas.

But credit must be given to the new generation of Abim leaders for their commitment to the apolitical modern Islamic missionary agenda, more so in the wake of Anwar's expulsion from Umno in 1998 and his subsequent arrest and imprisonment.

Thirdly, Anwar has both the intellectual and financial capabilities to push ahead with whatever agenda he chooses to promote – civil society, *reformasi*, anti-corruption and so on.

Already, he has declared his support for Abdullah in the fight against corruption, irrespective of the fact that his own abuse of power conviction was withheld by the Federal Court only days earlier.

It's a brilliant political move – one that makes him look magnanimous yet surreptitiously applying pressure on the Prime Minister at a time when the country's corruption perceptions index had worsened from 37th to 39th position globally.

Even Abdullah's insiders, after the initial euphoria, are beginning to acknowledge openly that the fight against corruption is a tricky business and could backfire.

Anwar had said he would like to meet the Prime Minister to discuss the fight against corruption, which is an integral part of his *reformasi* agenda.

At the time of writing, there is nothing to suggest that such a meeting will take place anytime soon. But Anwar's public statement on the subject is nothing short of a brilliant tactical move.

While on one hand, he is seen as being in tune with Abdullah on corruption, on the other, he is using the issue to dangle his

reformasi idea at the Government.

TREADING ON A THIN LINE

ANWAR is unlikely to want to consider rejoining Umno anytime soon. He does not have to and it is unwise to do so soon after regaining his freedom.

He cannot be seen to be too eager to go back to the roost even if he relishes the idea of eyeballing those in the party who abandoned him in 1998, in particular, his protégés and cronies.

Even without him making any move to rejoin Umno, he had successfully intimidated and rattled some elements in Umno, forcing them to call on the party to permanently close the door on him.

It appears from that episode that there are people in Umno who are worried that

leader in his stance against the opposition and the anti-Government and anti-Umno NGOs when he was in the Government.

His best platforms are the NGOs, the foreign Press and the international think-tanks and lobby groups. He has an extensive network with these organisations through his sponsorship and patronage of their activities when he was Deputy Prime Minister.

No other Malaysian leader – not even Dr Mahathir, despite his extensive travels – developed and nurtured international networking the way Anwar did.

With the majority of his friends and associates in the corporate world continuing to do well despite his absence, Anwar should not have difficulty raising funds for his causes unless he had raised a bunch of ungrateful tycoons and industry captains.

Furthermore, there appears to be reticence within Umno itself when members who were punished by the committee for money politics and other disciplinary breaches are either elected or appointed to the Supreme Council and the state liaison committees.

Anwar may get enough support should he contemplate a comeback to the party.

The road to Putrajaya is still through Umno. If Anwar's vision of a complete and unequivocal redemption is the occupation of the Prime Minister's complex, he has to consider the Umno route. Anwar was quoted as saying that he was not after the job.

It is unwise for him to contemplate such a move now. While extending the proverbial olive branch to the Prime Minister, Anwar cannot afford to offend and alienate his core supporters in the opposition camp and among the liberal non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

They stood by him when Umno abandoned him. He cannot be seen as ungrateful. The opposition have no problem pounding on Anwar should he abandon them. There is no love lost.

Anwar was as strident as any other Umno

Many of these young upstarts became instant corporate movers and shakers on account of his patronage. Some are key figures in the recently elected Umno Supreme Council.

The images transmitted by CNN from Munich during his hospital stay suggest that the group remains largely intact.

EXCITING TIME AHEAD

AT THE risk of being accused of harbouring bad intentions, I must ask: Are we seeing the re-emergence of Anwar as the 'mutant X' of Malay-Muslim politics?

Could or would he drive the same kind of invisible and surreptitiously effective powerbrokering in Malay-Muslim politics that was the hallmark of Abim under his leadership?

The answer is most likely yes. The

difference, if any, will be in the methods he employs. It is more likely to be a civil liberty kind of struggle than an outright political slugfest.

Although Dr Mahathir no longer holds sway and Anwar can capitalise on the much-touted freer political environment, he has baggage of his own that renders a full-scale political comeback a dicey proposition.

Thus, the NGOs remain his best bet. Through them, he can expect a healthy mix of constituents comprising social activists, civil libertarians and students.

These people are less likely to be judgemental partly because they are too young to remember what happened as recently as a decade ago. Anwar can hope to benefit from the *mudah lupa* syndrome of the Malays.

And the months ahead may prove to be an exciting time for the country although the mainstream Press may not give too much exposure to him. So, surf the net and read what the bloggers have to say.

Anwar might not have been totally enthusiastic about Mahathir's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) brainwave, but he

may end up as its principal beneficiary.

UMNO'S SUPREME COUNCIL IN JEOPARDY

SEVERAL lower-ranking Umno leaders have been suspended by the party's disciplinary committee for involvement in money politics.

More are likely to face the music in light of widespread allegations that some key members of the recently elected Supreme Council were involved in the practice.

This is notwithstanding some strange stances adopted by some accusers – the most bizarre being that of Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob's, 'Even if I have proof, I will not come forward because I don't want my friends to get into trouble and I don't want them to lose their posts.'

What can be more bizarre or shall we say, comical than that?

It is incomprehensible that an accuser should make such a statement. Elsewhere, he would have been called a liar and sued for libel.

Maybe the disciplinary committee is no

longer the appropriate body to act on the allegations. Some members have all along been questioning the *locus standi* of the committee.

They feel that since the definition of money politics falls within the realm of corruption, these allegations are better handled by the Anti-Corruption Agency.

Furthermore, there appears to be reticence within Umno itself when members who were punished by the committee for money politics and other disciplinary breaches are either elected or appointed to the Supreme Council and the state liaison committees.

Then, there is the question of honour. Those ministers and deputy ministers who offered themselves for election but failed to get the delegates' support should consider relinquishing their posts.

It appears that even after being endorsed by the Prime Minister, they still have failed to get the confidence of the party. **mb**

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