

Anwar's Release: A Poser

The acquittal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim comes very much as a surprise. What exactly happened that secured his freedom from prison? Theories abound, take your pick.

By Abdul Razak Abu Chik

SPECULATION, conjecture and any number of political permutations, take your pick in the explanation as to how and why former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is finally free.

Take a taxi ride and these so-called *duta kecil* (mini ambassadors) will tell you they knew Anwar would be released months ago. The neighbourhood *bai roti* (Bengali bread vendor) would tell you how happy he was with the news and that all is well with the world now.

Over at the Selayang wholesale market, your favourite fishmonger hacking away at a chunky slab of *tenggiri* gives the thumbs up sign when you mention the word 'release'.

A release it was – pure cathartic release for supporters, detractors and mere observers alike that after spending a large chunk of what would have been a very productive part of his political life, Anwar was set free by the Federal Court.

His supporters, from the most

fickle fan to the most loyal firebrand, can put down their fraternity flags and banish their protest banners.

Regardless of one's point of view, one cannot help but admire their resolve and perseverance in keeping the fires of protest burning. Their persistence keeps Anwar's name in the limelight.

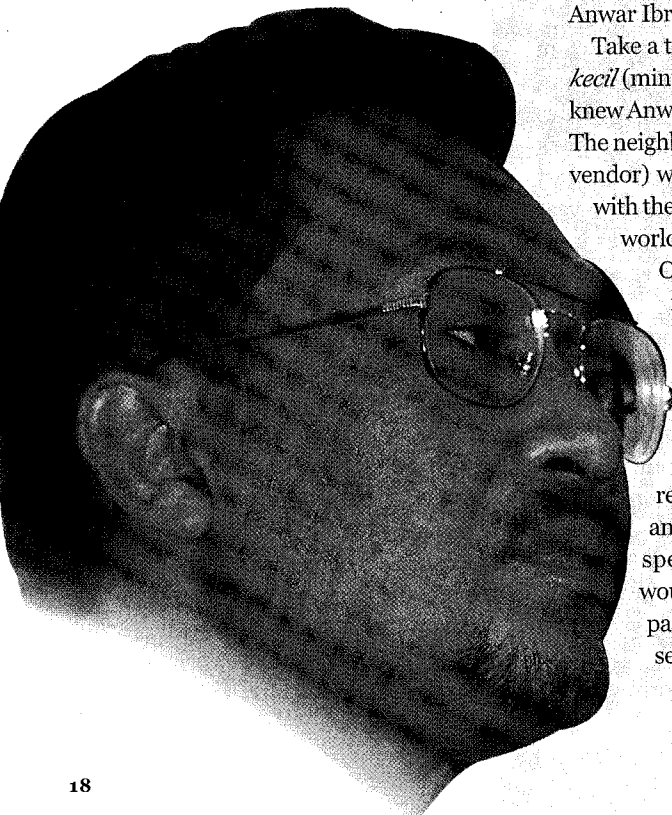
There were those who set up websites, some who sported sorority neckties and others who were dumped from influential office because of their affiliation.

Unlike fair-weather friends, who are now making a comeback pushing his wheel chair and shedding crocodile tears, the stalwarts have endured through thick and thin.

No doubt, some are just so *taksub* (blindly loyal) beyond reason that they simply cannot see the wood for the trees and that Anwar's strengths are, just like you and me, tempered with common human frailties.

Catharsis too is for those in the opposite camp. It might come as a surprise that there are just as many a committed bunch of people out there who have no sympathy whatsoever for Anwar. They are generally

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unconvinced of his credentials in neither steering the economy nor in espousing morality. For this group of people, the international interest in seeing him freed has more to do with meddlesome motives rather than honest altruism.

Anwar's handicap of course is that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's panacea for combating the 1997/98 economic crisis, which was the root cause of their political spat, has been universally recognised as an appropriate cure. On the other hand, no one will ever know if the International Monetary Fund (IMF) way favoured by Anwar would have worked for Malaysia. But the record thus far shows that it hasn't worked for many of the economies hit by the crisis.

Coming out of this affair a clear winner and smelling of roses? The judiciary. Anwar's successful appeal has just about everyone from the interested party to the bystander and skeptical observer believing that here was a demonstration of the clear separation between the executive and the judiciary.

Rightly or wrongly, the perception in the past was that the executive pulled the strings and the judges were there to do their bidding.

Rightly or wrongly too, a solitary decision to overturn the conviction of an important political figure is being seen as the ultimate manifestation of judicial independence.

This is not much help, of course, in that the layman and the legal profession — by extension the judiciary — reside at different addresses and speak different languages.

Why does it require a dictionary to help decipher a judgement so laboriously worded to say; 'Yes!' and an equally torturous trial to say; 'No!'

Why does it have to take the highest court in the land to acknowledge that a driver's testimony regarding the dates of a certain act of unnatural bent, central to the decision to secure a guilty verdict, only unreliable now?

Is the fact that the whole world has greeted this single appeal victory as a sign that at last, the judiciary in Malaysia has a mind of its own reason enough to rejoice?

Or is the appearance of this single swallow enough to herald the beginning of a brand new summer? Only time can tell.

But the Federal Court's decision has had some repercussions. The first victims to suffer from the fallout of the Anwar case will be rape victims. The court ruled that a precise date was essential in proving a case.

So, what now for Anwar and national politics?

If Anwar's feisty spirit so soon upon release is any indicator, then the Malaysian political stage is in for some exciting times.

Unless he does an 'Anwar' a second time around (he after all had, in his youth, behaved like a non-conformist firebrand only to eschew revolutionary zeal and revel in the rise to power within Umno), the opposition will be licking their lips at the

prospect of having a former 'insider' within their ranks.

Despite having his wings clipped until he serves out his 'political suspension' due to his corruption sentence, Anwar will still be able to take a job or two at the Government from outside Parliament.

He carries a lot of heft and influence with foreign governments and it remains to be seen if that is going to be a liability or an asset.

The one person who has come out of this episode smelling of roses is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. One may argue till the cows come home but regardless of the role played or not played by the office of the Prime Minister in Anwar's release, this one event is sure to be a watershed in Malaysian politics.

Anwar had said he would stick with the opposition but work with the Government. Abdullah denied any deal with him and laughed off suggestions that Anwar would be readmitted to Umno.

Whatever the case may be, Anwar's return to politics is bound to impact both the Government and opposition.

His rehabilitation is limited only by public understanding and assessment of the remarks by the consenting and dissenting judges who heard his appeal, and by how long the memory of Malaysians lasts. **mb**

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