

The link between Anwar and Dickens
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By Terence Netto

COMMENT Improbable as it seems there is a connection between Charles Dickens and Anwar Ibrahim.

There is a thread that links the year's bicentennial of the world's first celebrity author and the global peregrinations of Asia's leading spokesman of constitutional governance.

This is that the former, who is renowned for creating such indelible characters like Ebenezer Scrooge and Tiny Tim, Pip and Miss Havisham, Fagin and Oliver Twist, has come to be regarded as the supreme artist of democracy and the latter has established himself, in the face of all manner of repression, as the Pied Piper in the modern age of government by consent of the governed.

"You only have to look around our society and everything he wrote about in the 1840s is still relevant," said Dickens' biographer, Claire Tomalin.

"The great gulf between the rich and poor, corrupt financiers, corrupt Members of Parliament ... You name it, he said it."

The same can be said about Anwar Ibrahim.

salman rushdie You only have to give him a pedestal and this evangelist for democracy will use it to espouse the themes of freedom and equality with an ardor that is comparable to the ferocity Dickens displayed in attacking their lack in English institutions of the 19th century in such works as 'Oliver Twist', 'Hard Times', 'Bleak House' and 'Little Dorrit'.

Sure there is suspicion of the huckster in Anwar when he is caught in such liberty-negating twists as his decision to withdraw from a conference in New Delhi yesterday to which the writer Salman Rushdie (left) was invited.

But that does not mean that Anwar supports the Khomeini fatwa of capital punishment against the novelist; only that he declines to be seen in the company of someone who wrote a novel that derided the Prophet of Islam.

Not a radical

Like Dickens, Anwar is not a radical: the novelist stopped way short of wanting to take apart English institutions by the roots - he said they were not working well for want of compassion and equality; Anwar sees the same lack in supposedly democratic institutions in countries where the forms of constitutional governance is a cover for violations of their actual spirit - he wants form and function to match to beneficial effect for the hoi polloi.

Earlier this week, Anwar told the 20th World Public Relations Conference in Dubai he saw no difference between the spirit that animates the Arab Spring from the one that drives the Occupy Wall Street movement.

"The repercussions of the Arab Spring have been so far reaching that some say that Occupy Wall Street has been sired from its loins," intoned Anwar.

anwar ceramah in melaka 040112 "Many may take issue with that," he acknowledged.

But, Anwar argued that "a more apt description" of the two phenomena is that both are "borne from winters of discontent."

He elaborated: "Indeed, Occupy Wall Street is a clear indictment against market fundamentalism. It wants to nail the lie on the Wall Street mantra of 'leaving it to market forces.' It exposes the flaws, some say fatal, in the foundations of the capitalistic economic model."

Anwar buttressed his argument thus: "Arab Spring aspirants want free and fair elections i.e. equal opportunity to compete and on a level playing field. Likewise Occupy Wall Street wants equality and is that is not possible an egalitarian deal, a 21st century New Deal."

Anwar said the Occupy Wall Street movement was a "clear indictment of the invisible hand which has remained invisible so often that governments in the free world have felt compelled to intervene in situations traditionally left to market forces."

Toward what would be the thrust of these interventions?

"Social justice," is Anwar's unequivocal response.

Egalitarian principle

Anwar told the Financial Times which highlighted him in an article in a weekend edition of the prestigious paper in late January that his theory of social justice would be modelled on the egalitarian ideas of John Rawls.

The American philosopher, who died in 2002, laid the whole weight of his theory on an egalitarian principle which holds that an increase in the prospects of the better-off are justified only if they maximise the expectations of those most disadvantaged.

The FT journalist who interviewed Anwar was sceptical that Rawls could be a common reference point in what he described as the "ideologically inchoate opposition movement" (Pakatan Rakyat) in Malaysia that Anwar leads.

But Anwar pushed back against the doubts by saying that any major reform or change his government would introduce would have to take heed of the rights of minorities and would have to have widespread support.

In other words, Anwar was saying that he would apply the Rawlsian principle that the reasons his government would give for any policy would have to make sense to citizens who do not share the ideology or faith of its proponents.

This would put Anwar Ibrahim, John Rawls and Charles Dickens in the same boat, distrusted by both left and right, theocrats and liberals, for reason that George Orwell in 1939 gave for Dickens' enduring appeal - that the novelist was a 19th century liberal who tenaciously exercised his "free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are contending for our souls."

TERENCE NETTO has been a journalist for close on four decades. He likes the occupation because it puts him in contact with the eminent without being under the necessity to admire them. It is the ideal occupation for a temperament that finds power fascinating and its exercise abhorrent.

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