

Whom should we trust?
Malaysiakini.com
Apr 12, 2008
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On the eve of polling in the March 8 general election, a close friend enquired whether Anwar Ibrahim could be trusted or not, given his chameleon-like political career that saw him change his affinity in rather dramatic ways several times. This question about Anwar Ibrahim's trustworthiness has become all the more topical now that he is scheduled to come back to our Malaysian political arena on full steam next week. MCPX

anwar ibrahim pc 180208 05Even before the general election, there was widespread mistrust for Anwar among the Chinese electorate, because of his perceived sins committed against Chinese education during his tenure as education minister. One could argue that, as education minister, Anwar was implementing the education policy of Umno, but that would still not diminish the burden of his rather huge political baggage.

The Chinese community has always had ambiguous feelings for Anwar, even from the early days when he was involved with ABIM as a young radical Islamic activist. His Islamic credential may have been an asset for his career first in Umno, then as an ally of PAS when he was banished to political wilderness ten years ago. But for many Chinese who suffer from Islam phobia, Anwar is often perceived by many as a mildly threatening enigma.

In the ten-year existence of PKR, right up to the time of the general election last month, I was constantly bombarded with the question of whether Anwar would return to Umno, just like Ku Li did in the 90s after fighting Umno in vain with Semangat 46 as his political vehicle.

The assumption under such doubt is clear. PKR is the personal political vehicle for Anwar. If eventually he would return to Umno embrace, there is no point in supporting PKR and Anwar. This was a view greatly encouraged by MCA.

chandra muzafar 02Then again, on the eve of the 2008 general election, Dr Chandra Muzaffar issued an ominous warning to the nation. If Anwar shall become the prime minister of Malaysia, then the country would be heading towards an "unmitigated disaster". This much celebrated activist claimed that Anwar is certainly not the "knight in shining armour", as many perceive him to be.

Political phenomenon

I know both Anwar and Chandra personally for over two decades. For me to comment on them based on my skimpy personal knowledge of their private world is a betrayal of my privilege. So I would not do it. There should be honour even among politicians, activists, and writers.

Nevertheless, Anwar is such a political phenomenon in Malaysia that one should try to make sense of his personal significance in the public life of the nation. One can do this with justice if one examines the evolution of political values among Malaysians and political practitioners with a view of exploring the possibilities for a more enlightened democracy in years to come.

I shall not repeat some PKR stalwarts' observation that Anwar has been transformed by his incarceration for more than six years in "hotel California" in Sungei Buloh. Prolonged unjust imprisonment does do different things to different political leaders. It may break some, and it may transform others and distil, refine, and readjust both their resolve and their political orientation.

Some political leaders often do change their basic belief more than once in his lifetime. Sir Winston Churchill did cross the floor in the House of Commons, more than once, if my ageing memory serves me right. Party hopping may be a sign of opportunism in India or Sabah, but it is not always motivated by self-interest and greed elsewhere.

I have two ways of responding to this issue of Anwar Ibrahim's trustworthiness, and the first is related to the second.

In order to mobilise the masses of humanity for a common purpose, an outstanding and ambitious political leader will either deliberately or inadvertently project a personal charisma to draw political support. The poor demos indeed feel pretty helpless in matters of state generally, and often welcome a "knight in shining armour" - or a prophet from heaven breathing fire and brimstones - to deliver them from evil and suffering. This is an abiding element in basic mass psychology.

Nowhere is this more obvious than the DAP of old when they seemed condemned to be eternal opposition. Some of their leaders actually welcome ISA arrests or other forms of political persecution so that their sacrifice in personal terms facilitates their public image of a Prometheus-like tragic hero. Hero-worship can work wonders during general elections indeed.

The trouble with this political heroic is that sometimes the hero may turn out to be a great oppressor of the people they claim to have liberated. Mao and Castro come to mind. More topically, the pathetic picture of Robert Mugabe desperately clinging to power by all means is a reminder of how a senile former hero can slide to such great moral depths!

As the late great Lu Xin - arguably the greatest literary figure in China in the 20th century - wrote once, the ideal state for any country is when the need for heroes no longer arises. The need for, and existence of, tragic heroes is a clear indication that injustices in the society have been so entrenched that individual efforts to root them out almost always end in failure!

What you need is structural transformation in the erection of healthy mechanisms and effective institutions within the body politics so that the built-in democratic checks and balances will ensure political growth for the future of the nation, despite the will of individual political leaders. The rule of law must replace the rule of man.

Meaningful change

Therefore, whether Anwar is a "knight in shining armour" or not is beside the point in the larger historical backdrop. The real question is this: has Anwar been a powerful instrument to bring meaningful change to the moribund democracy prior to March 8? My conclusion is a resounding "yes".

Without Anwar and his multiracial PKR as the catalytic bridge amalgamating the two opposing tectonic plates of the DAP and PAS,

the loose alliance would not have been possible. The political tsunami on March 8 would likewise have been impossible. He was the one critical linkage that made possible the congruence of factors that changed the political sky in Malaysia irreversibly.

In a country with enlightened electorate who have been nurtured in the art of critical independent thinking, the people's political judgement will not be coloured by nameless fear.

There need not be fears that Anwar or any political leader will bring unmitigated disaster to the nation if he comes to power, as long as the people insist that there are healthy institutions that play by ethical and clear cut rules. As long as the democratic process is heading in the right direction, no matter how wobbly, top political leaders will be controlled by the rakyat, and not the other way round. At this point, the crucial change that Malaysia needs so badly is to make alternative government possible at the federal level first.

Frankly, the magic and the halo around top political leaders tend to be exaggerated. These people are realistic fallible men. The secret is not to make them into icons, and political leaders must indeed be vigilant so that they themselves will not believe in their delusory public image. This vigilance will guarantee sombre humility so necessary for authenticity in this the dirtiest of all dirty businesses!

In the end, voters must get their heads in the right space. All political leaders and their political parties are but the instruments for the rakyat and history. In a meaningful democracy, the people must be the masters of their own nation. That means they have to learn to use politicians and political parties to further the interest of the rakyat, rather than being used by politicians to attain wealth, position, and power.

Certain amount of trust in public personalities and the institutions of state is definitely crucial for the survival of a nation state. Without that trust, there would not even be any social cohesion that allows law and order to exist.

But that trust must not be blind or unconditional. The trust of the people in the leading men and the laws of their land must always be conditional and tentative. The whole idea in the evolution of democracy in world history is precisely premised upon this mistrust for people in power.

That is why we have the doctrine of separation of powers, and other checks and balances within our political system. Again, to quote the often misquoted dictum of Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely." Good political leaders will not demand blind uncritical trust from their followers, but will welcome all kinds of checks and balances to be applied to them in the most vigorous manner possible. They are supposed to have nothing to hide.

Therefore, the question is not so much whether we can trust Anwar Ibrahim or any other leading political figure. The question is about whether we can trust our good judgement, our wisdom, our instinct, and our collective strength in determining our own fate.