

**When Anwar speaks, they come**  
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The date is March 18, 2010. The place the London School of Economics, where Anwar Ibrahim is giving a lecture on 'Religion and Pluralism in a Divided World'.

Two hours before the lecture started, the crowd had started to assemble. Half an hour before the doors opened, we were ushered towards the lower basement of the Sheikh Zayed Theatre.

The queue was already snaking its way from the door of the lecture theatre and up the stairs to the main reception.

I was in the first hundred but I understand that a lot of people had been turned away. The capacity of this lecture theatre is just under 600 people. Last year, the hall was also oversubscribed when Anwar gave his talk.

NONETHis is my first time at a lecture by Anwar. Most people I spoke to were Anwar supporters, who were quick to point out that they had come, mainly for the man, and not so much the lecture topic 'Religion and Pluralism in a Divided World'.

Nevertheless, they were looking forward to the question-and-answer session at the end.

A rough breakdown of the crowd is: 85 percent in their early 20s, seven percent in their 30s, five percent in their 40s and 50s, and three percent in their 60s.

It would appear that they were 60 percent Chinese, 25 percent Malay, 10 percent Indian, and five percent Caucasian. They were mostly Malaysians although there were some Singaporeans too.

A lot of students were from other universities, King's College, School of Oriental and African Studies, Brunel. There was a sizeable portion of older people, mainly Malaysians living in UK. Some had come from as far as Birmingham and Newcastle.

Many of those from outside London expressed regret that they were unaware of Anwar's second lecture in London the following evening. Had they known, they would have made arrangements for an overnight stay.

No signs of jet lag

The lecture started promptly at 5.05pm. And when he and his entourage entered the theatre, the whole place broke into thunderous applause. He clearly had mass appeal.

NONEIt is impossible to believe that he had only just flown in from Kuala Lumpur. He looked fresh and showed no signs of jet lag.

After the introductions from professor John Sidel, Anwar took to the podium and introduced the various members of his entourage - Azmin Ali, Abdul Malik Abul Kassim, and former senator David Yeoh.

He informed us that he had spent the morning in meetings with ex-vice president Al Gore

and Mary Robinson, former president of the Republic of Ireland.

A transcript of his talk, I am told, will be posted on his website. His opening sentence was a poem from TS Eliot. Throughout his talk, there were various references to past scholars, religious figures, and authors, as well as various books and publications.

It was peppered with personal anecdotes and humour and was very entertaining. He talked about the inclusivity of Islam about 30 years ago in Malaysia and how the current state of Islam, in Malaysia, had somewhat declined, culminating with the recent issues involving the word 'Allah', caning of women and the power of the syariah courts.

The main message was that the Umno leaders were the ones to be educated about Islam. Hypocrisy, double standards were evident. And he bemoaned how Malaysia was not emulating its neighbour Indonesia, or Turkey - two predominantly Muslim nations, blazing the trail with reforms.

Visible impact

Finally, just as in his opening, he ended his talk with TS Eliot's 'Little Gidding':

What we call the beginning is often the end,  
And to make an end is to make a beginning  
The end is where we start from.

The talk was under half an hour with the rest of the time devoted to questions, which he fielded at a brisk pace. The questions ranged from Asean's role in Burma and the silence on the treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi, apostasy, Anwar's own failure as deputy prime minister to abolish the ISA, Anwar the young man who was more of a firebrand compared to the older Anwar who was less idealistic, the Orang Asli issue, Malay Muslim women as third-class citizens in Malaysia, Malaysia as a secular or an Islamic state and the last question for which, he says, he would answer at his next lecture in London (as we had run out of time).

The questioner wanted to know if Anwar had any weaknesses and if he felt any need to apologise.

Needless to say, many other people did not have the opportunity to put their question to him. He may not have gone into great depth and detail when answering the questions, but the crowd forgave him for that, and he received rapturous applause at the close of the lecture.

The most visible impact was his ability to engage and command attention with the young and old. Without doubt, he has charisma. Another startling observation was how pockets of people went away into little discussion groups in the various cafes and pubs in the area, still discussing the talk.

This, I take to mean that he stimulates thought. I know, because I overheard them.

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