

Two evenings with Anwar in London
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London is a city as ancient as the hills. More recently some Britons and expatriates have fled its grey and damp climes in a bid to avoid taxes that have hit 50 percent at the top level. These include bankers and financiers, and more respected names such as Mick Jagger and Formula One race driver Lewis Hamilton.

But there are many who stay. Amongst them are those men and women who feel the nations of their birth do not offer them the opportunity and freedom that they seek. And there are many. This list of countries cuts a wide swathe across the globe from Russia to Poland, South Africa and Malaysia.

Anwar Ibrahim came to London and in two evenings he addressed over a thousand of his countrymen. That is nothing like the tens of thousands who attend opposition ceramahs back in Malaysia but at home the rain is never as dismal as it is in London at night as winter takes its time to fade.

pkrcny open house 270210 anwarThey bothered to show up and so they were an easy and willing audience, applauding and laughing in all the right places. Some were more curious and motivated than others and even showed up both nights.

Over an hour at the LSE (London School of Economics) on Thursday, Anwar managed to quote TS Eliot, Winston Churchill, Alexis de Tocqueville and Islamic scholars. He also offered an explanation of the Ramayana, the famed Hindu epic. On Friday night, he referenced Samuel Johnson's condemnation of patriotism "as the last refuge of a scoundrel", a remark made popular in the early 1980s by Bob Dylan.

He tossed these out with ease in a stark reminder of the years spent in solitary confinement with nothing but books to keep him company. Anwar's message was underlined by his past and his uncertain future.

On Friday night, he spoke of the deaths of Teoh Beng Hock and A Kugan before he said, "I understand what humility is all about. I understand what freedom is all about."

And then he insisted that he would not be convicted this time.

Anwar spoke throughout the evening of change, that appealing concept sold so skillfully to the American public by Barack Obama that means different things to everyone.

He spoke of that inalienable right of freedom, he spoke of good governance, he spoke of justice and he spoke of equality. He was insistent that respect for individuals was paramount. Anwar was insistent that this applied to all as he argued that religion had to sit side by side with respect for the rights of others. He spoke of ideals and principles and all those soaring notions that skilled speakers can evoke so easily with language and are harder to transform into reality.

He proffered an image of a nation led by PKR that combined a more competitive economy with academic and media freedom and a "transparent" policy of affirmative action based on need.

Right to vote for overseas M'sians

This focus on the big picture followed speeches given earlier by PKR members giving insight into their work at the coalface of government. Teng Chang Khim, speaker of the Selangor State Assembly, spoke of DAP's commitment to reform.

Teng gave a breakdown of recent and future policies intended to boost accountability and improve oversight of expenditure, public bodies and assemblymen on both sides of the fence.

Abdul Malik Kassim, the Penang state minister for religious affairs, domestic trade and consumer affairs, summarized PKR's achievements with its record budget surpluses and appealed to young Malaysians to return to Penang to help in its bid to transform itself from a "sweatshop into a smart shop".

The final part of the evening was a lengthy question-and-answer session which gave Anwar an opportunity to hammer home his message and gain a good measure of the thinking of Malaysians abroad.

The audience were sympathetic but they were certainly not deferential. They were bright, well-educated and alert. A youth in his early 20s who lectures at Cambridge University asked Anwar if he would change once in power.

Another asked if there was a succession plan in place if he were to go to jail. A lady questioned how he would ensure the integrity of the Malaysian judiciary if he were to become prime minister. There were more questions than time.

Those present were a smattering of students, graduates who had decided to stay on in the UK to work, and some who had left a lifetime ago. Their questions revealed high levels of scepticism and awareness, both commonly accepted by political scientists as key features of democracy.

And as the audience trailed out into the night, many signed a petition calling for Malaysians residing abroad to be given the right to vote. These Malaysians live in a city of the displaced where it is all too easy to forget your past but their passion still burns for a country they once called home.

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