

Understanding Anwar
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KUALA LUMPUR — How does a Muslim village boy who faithfully attends Quran classes and goes home to the works of Lao Tzu and Confucius, grow up to view the world — and his country? The scope of Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim's worldview is matched by the breadth of his political ambitions. Having risen from the ashes, the leader of Malaysia's opposition is raring to prove his mettle at the upcoming elections.

Asia360 News editor-in-chief Goh Chien Yen caught up with Anwar Ibrahim in an exclusive interview at the Houses of Parliament, to discuss how exactly the firebrand politician plans to do that.

Asia360 News: There is a lot of talk about the general elections being round the corner. Some predict that they could be held as early as June this year. When do you think it will be?

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: I don't know. I'm not particularly good at speculating. But the incessant attacks in the UMNO media on the opposition and their rosy coverage of [Malaysian Prime Minister] Najib's movements, which you see virtually every day, is a sure sign of the imminent elections.

Q: Is the timing good for UMNO to call for an election soon?

AI: I don't think the timing is actually good for UMNO. You see, they have downplayed UMNO as a party. They are projecting Najib, to show that he's trying to do his level best. Relying solely on him, however, is to acknowledge the fact that there are strong sentiments against UMNO and the Barisan Nasional coalition. The other component parties that used to play a major role — MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and the MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) particularly — are completely sidelined. I don't believe they're that confident.

Q: And the timing is good for the opposition, for Pakatan Rakyat? What's your plan for the upcoming election in order to boost your chances of getting into the government?

AI: Well, we're working very hard under the circumstances. We have at least been able to present ourselves as a formidable force, a team, and I think that has helped. Unlike Najib, they're projecting him, but we always appear — the three party leaders [of the opposition coalition] — together. Then, there's a clear common platform from Buku Jingga, the Orange Book, and on some issues we presented at the recent Pakatan Rakyat Convention. The good thing is that we've been working very hard on those issues. We presented the case not only as an alternative government, but with clear policies laid out.

Q: So what are some of these clear policies from an economic standpoint? The Malaysian economy seems to be doing quite well, registering about 5% growth for 2011 despite the global slowdown. What can you do differently or do better on the economic front?

AI: We are of course for market economics and market reforms, but to us, governance

is central. Price hikes here are mainly due to monopoly. Rice and sugar are the monopoly of a few select companies controlled by family members of cronies. We believe that if things are done in a transparent manner and proper procurement policies, tender process, then we can minimally reduce some of these problems.

And this figure, the 5% growth, does not really resonate with the masses. Unlike our neighbouring countries, we're a net exporter of petroleum; the revenue rests comfortably with this huge income resource.

I don't think we have much of an issue with infrastructure, or economic growth. People tend to compare us with mostly developing economies. But I would always say that we should be compared with Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, and not Myanmar and Bangladesh. But what is more important in terms of economic policies is that we have the capacity to move forward at a faster pace and to improve, radically shift and substantially improve the quality of education.

Q: So these are what you see as the immediate challenges if you were to get into power. What would your priorities be in your first 100 days in office?

AI: We need to make sure and be clear that it is not a race-based politics, number one. Number two, the issue of governance. If an observer looks at the growth figures, they know what is lost to corruption.

Q: If the opposition comes into power, Malaysia will be faced with an unprecedented situation of UMNO not being in government. How would others such as the judiciary, military and the monarchy react to this new political state of affairs?

AI: This issue is probably relevant much earlier. In 1969, it was a race question. The opposition was seen to be an attack on the Malays. It is not necessarily right; I'm talking about perceptions here. By 2008, we [the opposition] controlled five states — this is not a concern anymore. We are talking about an UMNO-dominated government versus the opposition, which is also Malay-led, so you can't use this race card. Also now that we have been in government at the state level for some years, our interactions with the military, the police, has been deeper, and also with the sultans.

Q: So you think Malaysia is ready to move further away from race-based politics that have dominated the political scene for so long?

AI: If you look at the 2000 elections, it's clearly a departure. It's been quite clear since 2007. Some critics painted the picture that that if we do take over, it will be like a stooge to the Chinese. It has been used by Mahathir [the former prime minister] against me and it was used by Najib against me. He had publicly said that I will be a stooge of the Chinese, particularly the DAP (Democratic Action Party). My style has never been to be apologetic. Why can't I be used by the Chinese and the Malays and the Indians, for the good of this country? Instead of just denying, "No, I will not." Although this has been a major campaign in rural areas about the insecurity of the Malays, I think it's over. People finally want to know about the future, their welfare. You go to the Penang Malays, it's not whether a Chinese is chief minister, it is about their housing, about access to credit, which are their concerns. So we'll have to address these issues.

Q: What are the challenges for Malaysia as it modernises while remaining faithful to its religious and cultural heritage? Do you see a balance that could be struck or will it always be a source of tension?

AI: We have been able to navigate this successfully, maintaining our posture as a tolerant, moderate, Muslim society. The so-called contentious religious issues were not

raised by religious scholars but were purely a political ploy. After all, this race card, religion card are all inculcating a climate of fear. What they want to hear is what you have to offer in terms of concrete policies. If and when we do take over, then the constitutional guarantees and framework will be made on the issues of language and religion, which I think is clearly acceptable to Muslims and non-Muslims in this country. But, having said that, I wouldn't want to discredit the fact that it would still continue. Look at the UMNO media; it's a daily dosage of Christians versus Malays, so they may attempt to send this message through their incessant propaganda efforts to the rural heartlands.

Q: You've been scandalised, beaten, stripped of your title and thrown into jail. What keeps you going?

AI: I'm just plain crazy!

Q: Where do you draw your inspiration?

AI: I'm not crazy; I was just quoting Mandela. After I was released, he invited me, Azizan and the children to visit him. So we went to Johannesburg, because he wasn't doing too well. He was very apologetic, he said, "Anwar, I'm sorry we're not able to do much." I said, "Look, you did your best." He had immense influence and he was successful in even getting me out of the country for treatment in Johannesburg. He said: "People like us, people say we're mad, we're crazy." Then I intercepted and said to him, "Mad, for sure we are not, but crazy, yes." But I don't know. I'm grateful for my parents, they were quite idealistic, my late mum and my father.

Others have asked me how I see Mahathir now, and I spent the first 20 minutes talking about the nice time I had with him. They said, "No, please be serious." I said, "I am!" That's a wonderful thing to have. Of course I get angry, I counter his arguments, rebut very strongly, in some ways despise his hypocrisy, the gross injustice, but I wouldn't deny the positive contributions he made. But the destruction of the institutions of government, that's unforgivable. Personally, I'm okay, I moved on, but the judiciary, media, the police force, parliament, were all relegated to becoming inconsequential.

Q: Speaking of your relationship with Mahathir, do you have any regrets in the sense that perhaps things could have been done differently? After all, you were the heir-apparent. You were the deputy prime minister, slated to become the next leader.

AI: Oh, I thought about that a lot. You have to remember, I was in prison, so what do you do? Meditate, read and think. And sing, I sing quite a bit too. You do, you reflect, but then it was mutual, he was kind to me and I was exceedingly kind and loyal to him. It was a very difficult period but I don't think I had much option towards the end. In fact, I've always said to my more critical friends that I have absolved myself. After all, we were part of the government. Some of the decisions were bitter, but we needed to draw the line. Things like bailouts, things like the corruption reports against ministers, already on your table, and for you to say "not to do anything"... you have to bring it up! But people say you could have compromised, some friends did say that. But then you would have transgressed the boundary. If or when you do take over, how do you then rationalise with the public what you've done? If it's done by the prime minister, well there's not much I can do. But if it is condoned by you, you have a problem. So, do I regret it? No. Was it difficult? Yes. Do I think I had other options? No, except to resign early, to die a fighter.

Q: You're also a man of ideas. It was about 17 years ago when you wrote the book "Asian Renaissance". A lot has happened since. Asia is on the rise. Do you

think what you described as renaissance is happening now? And where do you see Malaysia in this emerging Asia?

AI: That book became quite contentious because people close to Mahathir thought we were clearly parting ways. Secondly, the central idea of economic empowerment is critical, but not everything, that's why I talked about renaissance, cultural empowerment, I talked about freedom, and justice. And I think there was a flaw in the thinking at that time of these economic gurus: prescriptions by the World Bank, the IMF about the East Asian economic miracle, and so forth. They didn't talk about disparity, the marginalised, the poor, whether the judiciary is independent or not, or if the media's free. To them 'the miracle' was in terms of a limited notion of economics and power. I hold very dearly the thesis I presented in that book. That's why I used the term 'renaissance'.

Q: Do you think this is happening now? There have been some changes. Indonesia has changed and is now a proud democracy. Malaysia has made progress too, slightly more liberal and democratic these days.

AI: I don't think they're that liberal — they are forced to be. Look at the parliament proceedings today — a mockery, a joke. But it's a challenge. Once you are transformed into a relatively vibrant democracy, then you actually allow for space. And that latitude is essential for the mushrooming of ideas. That, to me, is very critical when you talk in terms of economics or cultural empowerment.

That is happening more successfully in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand because they are more democratic. Although I wouldn't want to deny the fact that Indonesia, too, is facing a major problem due to endemic corruption and marginalisation. If the issue of governance is not resolved, people have this suspicion, then whatever policies, however rational or good, will always be suspect. Is it to enrich your cronies or is it really something really essential to the masses? Trust is important.

Q: What would you consider your greatest political achievement to date?

AI: I've not achieved much. For now, I'm cementing the three parties together. Fortunately, the leaders of the three parties are like-minded and willing to collaborate for a common agenda. But there is still a long way to go. So we shall see. People say that success means you assume office. It's not true. Success is when you're able to deliver. It's not when you attain the position. That's I think the wisdom of having been there and being duntrodden. And I think that keeps your sanity and humility. I think that's important. People think being prime minister is the end, but I don't think so. I think you should be evaluated and judged. And when you're able to honour your commitments after you assume office, and remain true to your ideas, that, to me, is a far greater challenge than articulating this ideal in the absence of authority or power. When you're there, you deal with the realpolitik, with the power play, with the big forces, with the tycoons. If they give you a 10 million dollar ring, what do you do?

Q: There's a strong moral conviction behind your political action. What keeps you true? What keeps you walking the straight and narrow and not, like you said, being wavered by the 10 million dollar ring or turning your eye away from what you think is not right?

AI: I'm a man of faith; I'm a practicing Muslim. At the same time, I grew up well thanks to my parents. My mother is not English-educated but she's an avid reader. She virtually read all novels in Malay or in Bahasa Indonesia in those days, the entire collection of Balai Pustaka books. And my dad, we always had these small compendiums of books, from Gandhi to Lao Tzu to Confucius, and it's interesting. For a Muslim family in a village, with a small library at home, we have that. So you familiarise yourself. I go to

Quran class, and following the Nabi (prophet), as an intellectual, you don't view religion purely from a dogmatic sense but you engage.

Roger Garaudy was a great philosopher, who started off being a Christian in France, then later on became a Muslim. It's very interesting what he said, unlike a new convert. He said, "I'm blessed, I grew up a Christian, and that's where I learnt compassion and tolerance. Then I became a Communist, and I had strong empathy and love for the poor and downtrodden. Then I became a Muslim and then I became more universal." So just because he is a Muslim, the past is no longer relevant? No, the past is what is him. Exactly what Amartya Sen had said. In his book "Identity and Violence", he said, "I'm an Indian, I memorised Sanskrit at the age of nine and I think it was a great thing, I'm a Hindu and I think we have a great civilisation, but because I'm in India, I think that Muslim moguls have done wonderfully well. But later I became a professor in Cambridge, in Harvard. I think it's a great institution and I love being here in America and despite the fact that I grew up in Santiniketan, I am a great admirer of Shakespeare. So who am I?" And that is beautiful. I use that a lot. And when you read it and understand it and you see these people talking about Malay supremacy, oh my god, they know nothing.
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