



THE POST 9-11 world remains fraught with contradictions, this much is widely acknowledged. The continuing rhetoric is about the need to 'bridge the divide' and 'close the chasm' but apart from ubiquitous new-ageist gesturing, there has been no serious attempt at grappling with the paradoxes of the global – and local – political climate.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim pledged to do this immediately upon his release from prison in 2004.

Still, 'chasms' and 'divides' only inspire uncertainty, and many have been bemused and some, severely critical, of the former Deputy Prime Minister's alliances and his willingness to negotiate all sides in an attempt to construct lasting consensus. A consistent Anwar critic, Philip Bowring, of the *International Herald Tribune*, has urged, 'Will the Real Anwar Please Stand Up' while *Hard Talk*'s Stephen Sucker insists on getting down to the issues of 'credibility'.

He is clearly yet to win over critics, who see him as attempting to remake himself and Parti Keadilan Rakyat with the New Economic Agenda (NEA) – a replacement for the race-based poverty alleviation programme, the new economic policy (NEP) – which promises to transcend race and religion. Anwar has been emphatic in calling for the dismantling of the NEP, but having

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A FORMER ADVOCATE
OF THE NEP CHAMPIONS ITS
DISMANTLING. CAN ANWAR
IBRAHIM BE BELIEVED?

RENAISSANCE MAN II?

by EDDIN KHOO & JASON TAN

relied on race and religion as his platform in his student days to his time as the country's second most powerful man, will Malaysians buy his new story? Specifically, will the Malays and bumiputeras accept the view that the NEP is now obsolete from one of its formerly biggest advocates? And is Anwar really the right man to talk about reform given the fact that for close to 16 years, he was very much part of the establishment that he now freely condemns?

Anwar remains a protagonist in the realm of international politics. He was recently appointed Honorary President of the UK based Accountability International, is advisor to the World Bank and is actively engaged in the development of human rights and democracy in the Muslim world. His academic appointments include professorial positions at Oxford and Georgetown Universities in the UK and the US, respectively.

His perceived 'absence' from the local political landscape has, however, given rise to qualms about his commitment to political change in Malaysia and the viability of Reformasi. A political ally and leader of PAS Youth, Salahuddin Ayob, recently urged Anwar to forsake 'elite politics' for a greater role in the politics of the nation.

Parti Keadilan Rakyat (formerly Parti Keadilan Nasional), formed in the wake of his dismissal from government, beating in custody and subsequent imprisonment, has since announced 'Anwar Back to Full Time Politics'. The party won an important seat in the last Sarawak state elections, and Anwar has begun addressing the many issues inspired by the vagaries in contemporary Malaysia's political landscape.

Off *The Edge* published the first local full-length interview with Anwar upon his release last year (OTE, Feb, 2005). In the intervening period, the blueprint of the NEA has been formulated. OTE spars with the former Deputy Prime Minister on the thinking behind the NEA, and the country's perceived conflict of politics, religion and the constitution.

Eddin Khoo: Datuk Seri, Parti Keadilan Rakyat recently proclaimed 'Anwar Back to Full Time Politics' following a period of ambivalence among supporters about your commitment to Malaysian politics after a lengthy period abroad. What, in practical terms, does this return to 'full time politics' mean?

I have been deeply involved [in national politics] right from the time I was released from detention. But there were also many priorities I had to attend to. 'Active politics' in the sense that I'm [now] based here in Kuala Lumpur and will spend most of my time here, though that does not exclude me from travelling abroad and participating in international conferences

EK: One of the first events following your return was the election in Sarawak, which proved a success for Keadilan. How has the party responded to this development?

I'm pleased because it was a very important learning curve that greeted us there. You're experiencing the worst terrain... but I'm very pleased with the outcome because we made very, very significant inroads, even into the rural heartlands, and the victory of Dominic [Ng Kim Ho] signifies very prominently the ability of Keadilan to penetrate Chinese areas and be accepted as a multiracial party.

EK: Your vision for a Malaysia has been encapsulated in the New Economic Agenda but there has been little national discussion and contemplation of this plan. There are also concerns that the NEA is a highly personalised ideal that is not necessarily shared by members of your own party, or the Opposition. Does the NEA have credibility?

We, of course, have a major hurdle to overcome – namely, the complete media blackout [of the NEA]. But notwithstanding that, the party leadership has debated this subject and, to be frank, much of the exposition of the views espoused in this agenda has been part of the process of conversations with the party leadership, and subsequently, the party conference endorsed this. So, it's not true that it is a personal agenda. Yes, I articulated the vision, but I did that after taking into account the views expressed by party leaders.

EK: Can you convince the nation that the NEA is necessary?

I think we are able to get the Malays to understand, even with the feeling of insecurity or fear that comes with the idea of scrapping the NEP. For three decades or more, we have been indoctrinated with the idea that the survival of the Malays rests purely and solely on the NEP. Now, we've debunked this effectively by saying 'look, it has only benefited a few'.

Yes, there were positive results of general development, social mobility, poverty alleviation, but given the facts of Gini Coefficient (a measure of income disparity), there is a glaring difference between the very rich and very poor [in Malaysia]. And if, on purely the issue of Gini Coefficient, we compare [Malaysia] with countries in the region, Malaysia fares badly.

I must be frank that I was very supportive of the NEP initially, in the Seventies, but that must be seen in the context of that period – a strong sense of Malay insecurity, abject poverty among the Malays, hardly any participation in business and trade among the bumiputeras. So, it was easy to convince the Malays of [the NEP]; but it is getting to be rather obsolete because there are new demands of globalisation

requiring companies and the country to be more competitive. We have lost a great deal in terms of attracting foreign investment; we have to grapple with cheaper labour in neighbouring countries and higher technology in others; and we're not even able to settle either of these problems.

But more pronounced, I think, is the evidence of the excesses of this [bumiputera] policy.

Jason Tan: So is an affirmative action programme no longer suited for the times? Is it just a matter of improving the implementation of the NEP or is its very conceptual basis no longer applicable?

It's not only an issue of affirmative action but a subtle, racially based agenda which I believe is no longer sustainable. Now, affirmative action, if it is used to provide the poor with opportunities, I'm still quite amenable to that. I would even suggest a form of affirmative action looking at marginalised groups, but this must transcend racial considerations.

The vast majority who would derive much of the benefit in terms of effective poverty alleviation efforts will still be the Malays and bumiputeras, and we need to assure the Malays and bumiputeras of this – because, in my discussions with them, they seem to say, 'well, if you discard the NEP, what would happen to the vast majority of the Malays who are poor and marginalised?' I say, 'yes' – but why must this programme be seen to be addressing a purely Malay or bumiputera problem? Why can't you see this collectively as Malaysians – as a Malaysian agenda?

There are pockets of poverty among the Chinese and they may be smaller in number, but you win the war because it is a Malaysian war, and Malaysian effort. ~~And it is also necessary for the Malays and Chinese to understand the predicament of the Indian community that, although clearly smaller in number when compared to the Malay problem, is far more serious.~~

But that is only as far as poverty alleviation goes – if you're talking about educational opportunities, we should push for the bumiputera, particularly in the rural heartland of, say, Pahang, Terengganu, Sabah or Sarawak; to ensure there are better schools and institutions to prepare them to enter universities. But what is happening now is an extreme form of racial affirmative action that is breeding mediocrity and rewarding the under-qualified just because they are Malays.

What's the problem? ~~Is it going to affect the Malays adversely if we have, out of the 50 deans at Universiti Malaya, 10, 15 qualified, competent Chinese or Indians?~~ Is it a problem if you have 15 universities and you have two, three, Indians, or five, six, Chinese who are really qualified to push these universities to emerge in the premier

league in this region?

But this is not happening because you breed mediocrity and the perception that it has to be Malays [who are appointed to these positions]. And, what is worse, in the name of bumiputera-ism, the promoted are at times the lackeys of the ruling clique. The moment we question [these appointments], the answer will be, 'Well, this is bumiputera policy'. Similarly, in the question of APs (approved permits for imported cars), contracts, decisions on privatisation – all used to support the few who are made into billionaires.

I think you can get this message across through the various ceramah, training programmes, pamphlets... you will be able to get the message across. I also appreciate when some PAS leaders suggest that it is not the policy, it is the question of implementation. I think it's both – when the policy is flawed, it will not push Malaysia in the new direction in this far more competitive region, and we will lose out.

Why has it turned out like this? You breed this sense of deprivation, the feeling of being discriminated against by certain segments – not necessarily right, but just because you pursue this policy and this agenda, you are breeding that. And I don't think it is fair for the third, fourth, fifth generation Chinese to be allowed to be made to feel this way because of this policy. There is a lot of rhetoric, propaganda, to suggest that Malaysia is doing remarkably well; and due to the massive abuse of information, people are just blinded by this fact and accept it at face value.

It is important that we drive home the point and provide the statistics and data. Yes, we have done reasonably well when compared to the poorer countries – even compared to most Muslim countries who recognise that Malaysia and Egypt, for example, were on a par in the Seventies, but we have since surpassed Egypt. But let us now compare Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, with whom we were at about the same level of development in the Seventies; Singapore has about double the GDP of Malaysia; just below that is Taiwan and South Korea; and far below that is Malaysia.

So, we have to look in these terms and start getting people to think, 'Why is it that Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea were able to do much better than us? And why is it necessary for us to shift the basis of comparison into one of Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Mali and Senegal...?'

EK: You may have convincing data but one of the more serious problems confronting the NEA is the matter of racial conditioning, even among the non-bumiputeras. Will you be able to advocate the NEA while deconstructing the racial conditioning that remains so

'essentialised' in this country?

Yes, you're right. Because the entire basis of the discussion is the NEP, and therefore the racial connotation between those who are perceived to have benefited from the NEP and those who have been deprived exists. This connotation, however, is flawed, because the Malays are now saying, 'Look, we are not benefiting from the NEP, it's the top cronies'. And the Chinese must be told and made to understand that this is actually fact, that we now have to work together to try and forge a new agenda.

I have also made it quite clear in my discussion with a group of top Chinese business leaders and professionals, urging them to respond positively in this direction. Look, if we want a new economic agenda, the Chinese must also do their part and acknowledge that there are areas in which they participate where they can get the Malays and Indians on board. But they're not responding in that manner, so the Malays come and tell me, 'Don't give concessions when the Chinese are not considering anything'.

But I think this period, this stage, is not one of concessions; it is one of understanding – getting into the discourse to appreciate, and demonstrate, that we're sincere and genuine in this programme which would benefit all, and shift the old mindset from one of racial equation to economic, educational or language problems and issues.

EK: The NEA is an outcome of your realisation that the NEP, which you fervently championed as a student activist and politician, has failed and resulted in Cronyism and a subsidy mentality. Wouldn't it be correct to say that this likelihood should have been realised from the plan's inception, and addressed by proponents of the policy such as yourself?

In the Sixties – with the kind of infrastructure and understanding that existed then – I think the general convention and understanding was [the situation] required a form of intervention by the state, 'social engineering', to ensure that the clear disparities and inequities be corrected. This was soon after Independence and I think the mantra of the period was clearly this. And I surely believed that had you moved on, at that stage, into a market driven, laissez faire economy, it wouldn't have been something palatable for the time.

Had we moved in the right direction, I thought we would have provided a firm base [for the future]. I don't believe the entire thesis of the NEP was flawed because it was always seen to be a temporary adjustment-period, so that finally the Malays, I think, were happy; and the non-Malays were quite convinced that after the 1969 tragedy, we had to ensure

political stability, to appease the concerns and feelings of insecurity among the Malays. This needed to be done.

But we're talking about three and a half decades later, and after billions – 30, 40, 60 billion – have been squandered, and you start thinking that there is something terribly flawed about that context, and in the thinking and understanding of it. What is more worrying is the pervasive sense of dependency on such an obsolete policy, because we are not providing for a forum, or latitude, for any other alternative to be proposed.

Again, I'm not saying that there was no debate or contrarian view, but it has never been in the mainstream; it has always existed in subaltern kinds of discussions. I think what we need to do now is to bring the entire discussion into the mainstream of debate. But some Malay colleagues have advised me, 'You'll lose a lot of support among the Malays if you pursue this agenda.' In fact, I had a discussion with Muslim student leaders who reminded me of the social contract. I had to explain to them, 'Are we compromising the issue of the Malay language as the official language, or Islam as the religion of the Federation or the even the position of some Malay-bumiputera privileges? We're not questioning that; we're talking about a policy after five decades of Independence!'

EK: When issues of a compromise on matters of 'ketuanan' are brought up, in your experience with communities such as the student leaders, what do you believe are their anxieties?

It is not so much a matter of anxieties or insecurity; it is due more to the massive propaganda. This government, both Umno and the Barisan Nasional, has been successful as a result of imparting these racial based policies and telling the Malays, in courses under the BTN (Biro Tata Negara), for example, with clearly racist undertones – clearly! – that all this is a 'social contract' and that if you are not united under Umno, you would be swallowed by the Chinese, or if you touch the NEP, you would be swamped by this massive Chinese appetite for control and wealth, particularly in the light of this growing Chinese dragon.

But you know, such arguments, if put on the table and properly discussed, cannot be sustained, and are certainly flawed. It's interesting that these [BTN courses] take place behind closed doors – very secretive operations – under the PM's department. Monthly, thousands have been trained; annually, probably 200,000 to 300,000 or more, half a million have been trained, to impart this sort of message.

So, 'look, we are poor' is not a legitimate anxiety. If you tell them this policy must redeem the issue because Malaysia is



Anwar and Mahathir: Together the two men pushed forward Umno's Islamic agenda post Iranian Revolution until their 1998 fallout

not Mali or Chad; [and that] we have the capacity and resources, but look at the issue of Gini Coefficient, poverty alleviation, and what is mentioned by many credible reports about under-investment in our future, in primary education – if we provide them with these figures, I don't believe there would be a major problem since it takes only 20 minutes to counter the arguments [against the NEA].

I'm confident of that because I've done it, even in the rural heartland of Kedah, Melaka, where these issues are being addressed. And I ask them, 'Do you still want an NEP, a policy that is obsolete, that's been squandered by a few or a policy that caters for your interest, poverty alleviation and to ensure that Malaysia continues to propel its economy upwards, since once you do that, you can distribute income? Of course, I am also somewhat Rawlsian (referring to the legal theorist John Rawls) in my view of distributive justice. It is more than just an obsession with growth and development.

EK: Many of the issues you've raised have been addressed in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP). You have expressed concerns that the 9MP is likely to fail since it lacks a climate of accountability, development of human capital and is ensnared in racial concerns. Do you object to the principles outlined in the 9MP or are your concerns confined to matters of implementation?

In some ways, the 9MP does attempt to address some of these concerns but I think they (the government) missed the main thrust of the agenda, namely the issue of governance and accountability. You can talk about 101 impressive policies but the issue of governance and accountability is a major problem in this country now.

Secondly, the issue of competitiveness in a globalised world. With the advent

of China, India and Vietnam, the attractiveness even of countries like Thailand and Indonesia when compared to Malaysia, is not being addressed. To continue with impressive platitudes and the new mantra about development and growth, which is all there in the 9MP, but then come back to reinforce the obsolete policies of the NEP... not having the courage to dismantle some of the major weaknesses that relate to the issue of governance and accountability, I think, will not bring us anywhere.

Even the issue of implementation leads to the question of governance and accountability. If this issue were addressed, I believe something more realistic, in terms of policies and implementation, could have been created. Surely if you want to ensure [the 9MP's] effectiveness, it must be seen in the context of the success and failures of the 7MP and 8MP?

Seen from that context, there was some attempt to address problems, some reference to human resource development, research and training, attractiveness to investors. But then you say we have to be more globally competitive, but at the same time say we have to have the NEP... A plan, however weak, can look quite impressive, but the final measure of its success is in the area of implementation.

You can counter that we're not that badly off since our economy has not floundered. But that's because of the industriousness of most people, particularly the Chinese, [a fact] which most Malay leaders do not have the courage to address. But it is a fact. I think one of the more prominent remarks on this issue was made by Peter Drucker at a symposium in Japan where he made this point in a very glaring manner, that [Malaysia's] success is because you have this good base of industrious Chinese, particularly in the SMEs.

Well, I would say also because of stability, and we can add other factors, but that major point must be considered.

EK: Apart from perennial concerns about issues of human rights and freedom in Malaysia, there are emerging fundamental contradictions involving issues of religion. You made a firm stand in the Moorthy case, for allowing non-Muslims the right to be heard in the Civil Courts in matters involving Islamic affairs. What was the response to your call among the Muslim constituency?

Prior my public statement, I met with religious scholars, Muslim party leaders, Muslim NGOs, also an ex-mufti and leaders of non-Muslim organisations, and that [public statement] was generally the consensus.

Prior to that, of course, people were just angry – that period of rage when they take extreme positions – the Muslims saying that non-Muslims are trying to undo what was agreed upon, including the purview of the Mahkamah Syariah; the non-Muslims stating the contrary, particularly the Hindus, saying 'we are being compelled to subscribe to and accept the ruling of the religious court'. But I asked Muslim groups, 'What do you want? You want your cases to be adjudicated by religious courts. Do you have any intention of forcing the non-Muslims and their problems to be adjudicated in the religious courts?' And their answer is 'no'.

Then, why can't you agree on some form of amendment, if it doesn't touch on Article 121 (1A) [of the Federal Constitution, demarcating civil and syariah court jurisdictions] and something that

can ensure and guarantee the rights of the non-Muslims? And this was agreed upon. I made this point in a number of my speeches, to a predominantly Muslim crowd, explaining the Moorthy case and I think people accepted it.

And so I asked them, 'What is the problem?' It was a result of the impression they got from the media and Umno leaders that non-Muslims, particularly Hindus, wanted to disband the Mahkamah Syariah as an institution. That was certainly not the case; although some extreme statements were made when people were just enraged by the whole episode and I can understand that.

~~In my experience of the Moorthy case, there was no problem; that's why I said there was a lot of sympathy, especially for the Moorthy family who suffered immensely and who were not given fair treatment. I spoke in front of PAS leaders and predominantly Muslim constituents about the case and people accepted [my reasoning].~~

This again reflects not only the failure, but a deliberate attempt by the government-controlled media and the ruling party to allow this to go on, because they sense this will cause division and this division will only benefit the ruling party, in their assessment. We will have to battle this head-on. And this is my advice to the Opposition – instead of playing to the old racial and religious game as we did in the past, just tackle the issue head-on; and it's important for Muslim leaders to take this position.

~~But even the non-Muslims are reacting to this. On their part, give a categorical assurance that Muslims have every right to decide for themselves to subscribe to their Muslim personal law, but that non-Muslims can demand that their rights be protected.~~

Muslims, on the other hand, have a claim to be adjudicated by religious courts – with some flaws, of course, since I'm not suggesting that Mahkamah Syariah is perfect; a lot of amendments and reviews are required. Muslim leaders would be required to make it very plain to non-Muslims that it was never the intention to compromise their [non-Muslim] rights, and in extreme cases such as the Moorthy case, we will be at the forefront to defend those rights.

JT: This, essentially, requires a decoupling of race from religion. How viable do you think calling this bluff (of 'playing the old racial and religious game') would be as an election strategy?

We have to work from now to decouple not only race from religion, but both religion and race from the entire equation [of governance]. We require a concerted effort now, since you know when it comes to the election campaign, RTM and TV3 will broadcast propaganda – Malay programmes will highlight the issue of the fear and insecurity of the Muslims and the Chinese and Tamil programmes suggest other things.

But I trust the wisdom of the electorate. Don't ask me why or how, I just have that confidence. My personal predicament is of six years of sustained, massive propaganda, malicious attacks by the entire mainstream media to get to me personally. But now that I'm out, I find, to the contrary, that there was great sympathy for me, and after one and a half years, those who have written, emailed, approached me, apologising [for thinking badly of me], are by the thousands.

How do you explain this? Where did they read, how have they come to understand? So, we must have the confidence and belief that people do have that capacity.

EK: Analysts have attributed the roots of the problem to the period of 'Islamisation' under the Mahathir-Anwar administration. You were a principal protagonist in government at that time. Could you explain the rationale behind the 'infusion of Islamic values in the administration' and how, as one journalist has asked, 'it has all come to this'?

The infusion of Islamic values was an attempt to alert the Muslims and non-Muslims to the positive, ethical values of Islam – of incorruptibility, diligence, good management, tolerance – which we wanted to impart. And we tried to do this in many of our publications, for example. I remember one about work ethic in Islam when we felt that some officers were getting lazy, inefficient and intolerant.

~~But then there were weaknesses because we were then trying to appease, or counter, some of the political pressures to derive some political advantage and this was a problem affecting not only PAS, but many in Umno and the state governments.~~

I used to cite this example of my experience with the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka: I had suggested that the book by Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, be translated into Malay. They agreed, but then the Islamic Affairs Department objected because there was one paragraph on education where he (Fazlur Rahman) referred to the truncated system represented by Al Azhar.

I mean, you can choose to agree or disagree, but what is wrong? Just discuss that and you can publish five more books defending Azhar as an institution, but the sense of intolerance then... And, of course, they would justify their objection based on the 'infusion of Islamic values'. Similarly, this whole debate on [Islam] Hadhari. It's the same problem – a problem of not giving enough space and latitude for even minor criticisms of the religion, all in the name of 'sensitivities'.

This has nothing to do with the 'infusion of Islamic values'. In fact, this is contrary to it. I had called for traditional religious education. I was very supportive that every community, particularly the Muslims in Kelantan, Kedah, Terengganu have every

right to strengthen their madrasah, since the problem was not the madrasah.

They [religious schools] were having problems and we were dealing with a very traditional – in a negative sense – group who were not opening up, not beginning to understand modern education, so I said, 'look, you want teachers, we will send you teachers from the Ministry of Education' and ~~we sent English teachers, set up labs, sent maths and science teachers. And this is what you need to do. Not use the Musharraf method of simply closing down the madrasah, because the problem is not essentially the madrasah. In fact, the conduct at some of our mainstream schools is quite extreme too.~~

EK: When this whole process occurred, did you not anticipate that when religion becomes part of government, and when the politicisation of religion becomes acute, everything else is merely a process of trying to temper it?

The issue of the 'infusion of Islamic values' was never, to my mind, an issue of politicisation. In fact, if you look at many of my earlier speeches, they were always concerned with the problem of Islam and the over-politicisation of the religion.

I'm not saying that you can't politicise it at all – there's always this debate that Islam is a complete way of life – but when there is over-politicisation, there's not enough discourse on the issue of knowledge, tolerance or the ideas of the great scholars. Instead, you dwell on the notion of whether this is an Islamic state or not, whether Islamic law should be applied or not, the rights of non-Muslims... But whose fault is all this? Is it just the fault of the Opposition? Or is this the failure of leadership in this country?

My consistent view is that it's a problem of governance and accountability... they [the government] are not accountable and that is where the problem lies. There's no free media so people can't debate; and when you have a free media of course there will be problems. People raise issues – super liberal attitudes, perhaps – but, okay, deal with it! Counter these arguments. You can't 'ban' every time there is an argument that runs contrary to your interpretation of Islam – then you'll just start banning all journals and magazines, and this, again, is contrary to religious tolerance, intellectual tradition and so on.

EK: What is your perception on the Inter Faith Commission, Article 11, and a recent group, Badai, that has resulted in problems of public order. PM Abdullah, meanwhile, has called for groups to be mindful of 'sensitivities'. What is your assessment of the present anxieties?

To my mind, first, you must allow for discussion. There is no way we can

condone any attempt that runs contrary to the legal process, so I would certainly take a strong position against a group that would forcibly disrupt a discussion. Notwithstanding that, as I said to the Inter Religious Organisation, which represents only non-Muslims, you must also understand the context here...

EK: But that's a result of Muslim groups not willing to participate...

Yes, partly because the issues at hand are only matters against the issue of Islam. So I told them, 'Look, why don't we get a different agenda and start afresh?' First, we talk about the relevance of religion, problems confronting this country, the concerns of Muslims and of non-Muslims. ~~You cannot simply start with an Opposition paper that is seen by the Muslims to be offensive to them and which puts them on the defensive.~~ This inter-religious organisation is talking about past experiences and continuing the rancorous debate on those issues.

Secondly, with sensitive issues like this, you can project it publicly but I think if you want to help solve the problem, then get a serious, closed-door discussion and debate on the issues because in my experience, even in the Moorthy case, we can resolve this... the unfortunate fact is that Muslim organisations are not meeting their non-Muslim counterparts.

The other point is the need to express Muslim concerns also. ~~There is a feeling which must be addressed, and which many in the liberal crowd do not seem to appreciate, the need to make very plainly clear, and to assure Muslims that in this whole debate, it is not the intention to put Muslims on the defensive or to put them under scrutiny.~~ Because they [Muslim groups] say 'you're simply trying to liberalise everything, people are getting so morally decadent and you don't want to address this but simply take a position that is consistently against us'.

There are those who will say I'm giving a political answer here, but my advantage is that I listen to both [sides] and I think we are discussing at cross purposes, actually.

If we are not careful, we are not going to win the war or battle. If we are not careful, the 'liberal crowd' because of its influence in the mainstream media, and of course, with international media support, will end up marginalising the entire spectrum of the Muslim population who constitute the majority [in this country].

Not, again, because this was the case of Malay insecurity in the Sixties, [albeit] over the economy. It is now Muslim insecurity, which may not necessarily make rational sense, but I'm talking about a perception in this period that there is an attempt to encroach on Muslim rights. This can derail the entire process [of dialogue].

So, I think we have to come up with a mechanism to try and allay this fear and at the same time move on. This is not an attempt to preclude an open debate or discussion. My position on the cartoons issue, for example, was very clear. You can protest against the cartoons, but as a matter of principle and policy, I am against the banning of newspapers.

I was asked in Islamabad, Pakistan, where there were those whose response was, 'that means you're not punishing them!' My reply: Go by the law. Who are you to punish them? Go according to the process. There are blasphemy laws and so on, but these have to be very well-crafted pieces of legislation that should not be used to deny the right of free expression... it's a very complex issue.

Some NGOs and civil society groups represent a particular area of interest. To them, freedom simply means the freedom to articulate their own narrow interests while forgetting the major problem.

For a group that is not happy with some aspects of Muslim personal law, that is their main preoccupation. It does not matter if you squander half of this country, does not matter if the media clamps down on all other news except for the fact that your news must be covered.

EK: There has been criticism that the present administration is 'indecisive' and a seemingly creeping nostalgia for the 'decisive leadership' of Tun Mahathir. Even PAS Youth leader Salahuddin Ayob called for him to serve as a voice for the Opposition. What does this say about our collective political will?

I don't buy that! With regard to Salahuddin, I have no intention to comment – PAS is being seriously reprimanded for such remarks. I don't think there is a public outcry or demand for any kind of authoritarian rule. What is critical for our country is public discourse and effective leadership.

JT: The problem for Anwar Ibrahim remains credibility. In a recent interview with *Off The Edge*, Datuk Shahrir Samad said this of the NEA: 'It's good, but why wasn't it done when he (Anwar) was in power?' How much could you have done to reform from within, as you are now attempting to do from without, to have led such matters as the 'intolerance' you mentioned earlier, to a better outcome?

There was subtle criticism of the judiciary, the media. I remember giving a speech on the media in this country, and said that you either choose the projects that satisfy philistine tastes or encourage debate and discussion on broader issues, which would make the issue of our development more interesting.

I remember also that I was at a forum in Kluang, where I spoke of the independence and integrity of the judiciary. [Former

Chief Justice, Tun] Eusoff Chin was not too happy that I had made a comment on the [Lim] Guan Eng case. He said something about that and the AG then protested to Mahathir [about my comments].

I introduced the Anti-Corruption Act, and if that isn't reform from within, what is? That was a major risk at that time because you are actually fighting the entire system. That was my attempt, not that subtle, at reform from within the system.

But I remained an optimist. I thought that given the scenario then, I was able to make some headway. I'm sorry; I don't want to be accused of talking about the past, but here we are talking about consistency, credibility.

I am happy that Datuk Shahrir indirectly acknowledged the fact that you need to support reform at this stage. I just hope he becomes bolder with that now. And I'm pleased, also, with one or two of his decisions, for which he has paid a heavy price.

But, I did my part too. Yes, it took some years, also at a heavy price. There was a line drawn, there was a limit to what I could endure. I could of course elaborate this point by point but the essence is about accountability.

Did you amass wealth when you were in power? Did you take punitive action and support the banning of publications, detention without trial?

When I was acting prime minister, was anyone detained? Even when papers were submitted to me, I refused to sign. I did not. I can't imagine signing an order for detention without trial.

Before I became deputy prime minister and vice president of Umno, of the people who were detained in the Operation Lalang of 1987, many of them even asked their families to appeal to me to see Dr Mahathir and appeal to him for their release... So, I appealed, but the matter was beyond me.

JT: Just one more thing: The NEA represents quite a dramatic change in the way politics might be conducted in this country. The tenor of this country's politics – the direction of this country – is determined largely by the state of Malay politics, and if the NEA is accepted, life here may be quite radically changed... Would you have felt comfortable proposing the NEA while you were still in Umno?

Look at my speeches from the time when I was Finance Minister. Did I ever talk about Dasar Ekonomi Baru? Not once in the Budget speeches, 1991 to 1998, did I make any reference to Dasar Ekonomi Baru.

JT: So, did you feel restrained from commenting on the NEP while you were in Umno?

No, no... That was a religion to them, and you become a kafir in Umno... ■