

RETHINKING OURSELVES



JUSTICE,
REFORM, AND
IGNORANCE IN
POSTNORMAL
TIMES



ANWAR
IBRAHIM



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Justice, Reform, and Ignorance
in Postnormal Times

Anwar Ibrahim

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For Azizah





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EYE OF THE STORM

Change is, more often than not, a tropical cyclone. And in the waning days of the twentieth century, we knew that we were not only at the mercy of one of history's greatest cyclones of change, but perhaps the first convergence of multiple simultaneous mega-events. The post-Cold War world triggered a realigning of geopolitics, technology was advancing communication, information, and efficiency by quantum leap, and the World Wide Web had arrived heralding phenomenal change. Along came disruptive shifts towards globalisation, a neoliberal economic order, and the ebbing crises in energy and global warming. At the centre of the tropical cyclone is the eye of the storm, the calm and tranquil epicentre of the event. The winds and rains cease as clouds eagerly swirl around. In the latter half of 1998, the eye of this storm was firmly fixed on the country I call my home, Malaysia.

The sun went down on 20 September. Yet, the usual twilight cooling of temperatures did not follow. The tension between the people and the government was thick and a coup de grâce from the powers that be could come at any time. Beneath the surface, this day was the culmination of weeks of orchestrated campaigning that had built up a vile media blitz to assassinate my character. Surrounding the eye of the storm, the point of least inten-

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sity, is the eyewall, a ring of towering thunderstorms representing the most intense zone of the storm, where storms are most severe and the winds are at their highest. Eighteen days prior, on 2 September,¹ I was unceremoniously and summarily sacked from my posts as deputy prime minister and minister of finance. I was relegated as a political outcast to face the overbearing might of the state.

The storm began with an opportunity. In 1997, I assumed the office of acting prime minister. The reform I had long sought after could finally be implemented. Working with what was then called the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA), we looked into some glaring loopholes in the agency's existing structure. We even conducted a detailed study of the Hong Kong Anti-Corruption Commission as a point of comparison. One of the more glaring finds in all this research was that the ACA, as it stood then, would allow corrupt officials to be shielded from the law once they were no longer in office. To rectify this deficit and pave the way for the contemporary iteration of the ACA, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), an amendment was drafted. The amendment was first discussed in a cabinet meeting where my fellow ministers seemed to suggest that it was not the right time for such changes. If not now, when? So, I threw caution to the wind in spite of the exhortations and earnest advice from close colleagues of the repercussions of my actions. I pushed the amendment through parliament where it was voted into law. My actions were seen not just as a threat against the holders of power but as an audacious attack against the beneficiaries of the kleptocrats—families, cronies, and captains of industry. Soon after, the knives were out against me. The storm was in full gale.

The average eye of a tropical storm can be between twenty and forty miles wide, but the experience can last for around thirty hours. The eye I was in lasted for eighteen days. Prior to this rela-

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tive calm, the ferocious eyewall of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis gave its worst. On 2 July 1997, a heavy clap of thunder rolled across the financial markets of East Asia. The Bank of Thailand, having run out of international reserves, threw in the towel and floated its currency, the Thai baht (฿), in order to sustain its US dollar value. Unsurpassed since the Great Depression of 1929–39, this turmoil started to brew, eventually unleashing a raging tempest from Thailand, throughout Southeast Asia. It first went to the Philippines, then to Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, before taking off for the shores of other Asian countries. The chaos erupted with such rapidity and force that it also spread to Russia and Latin America and threatened to engulf the entire world with its pernicious impacts.

In the financial history of the world, no capitalist country has ever demonstrated immunity from one kind of financial crisis or another. It is the nature of the free market that sometimes overshooting takes place and the economy becomes susceptible to external shocks. But on the whole, governments that built strong institutions would command the confidence of the people. When a financial crisis breaks out, swift and decisive measures must be taken by responsible governments to stabilise the situation. Under these circumstances, the use of public funds may be the only means possible to turn the economy around. When I was finance minister in the 1990s, we called this the Keynesian doctrine of pump-priming, a device not entirely free from misuse or abuse. Depending on who was doing the pumping and who was on the receiving end, collecting the fruits of priming, such an undertaking can be open to gross malfeasance. When the issues of governance, transparency, and accountability are left neglected, even the tried and tested toolkit for economic woes could prove to be ineffective. Between the implementation of sound policy decisions and the realisation of a government's true objectives lies a deep and widening chasm. Between saving billions for the

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nation's coffers and rescuing friends and cronies, falls the shadow of shady decisions made by those in power. The voices of hawkers and rural farmers fall on deaf ears, drowned out by the pleas of the sons of cronies.

On reflection, this was a time of financial euphoria where Malaysia was among the Asian Tiger economies, hailed as the Asian Miracle. The World Bank published a special report entitled 'The East Asian Economic Miracle', which analysed the economic achievements of the region. While many Asian leaders basked in the glory of this accomplishment, I took it with cautious optimism. I was mindful that the success could be transient if we were not alert to the pitfalls that lingered, primarily related to issues of abuse of power and corruption. On one occasion, in my welcoming remarks to the World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn, I said that while we rejoiced at our success, we should not forget the plight of the poor and the marginalised. Further, I highlighted the imperative of good governance and accountability as a bastion against the temptation and risks of corruption and abuse of power. This would warrant the necessary checks and balances that could come about with proper commitment and legislation.

As a nation, Malaysia had managed to weather that crisis, but only just so. This financial crisis served as an ominous warning for global financial crises to come. The 1997 crisis also nearly snuffed out the 'Tiger Cub' economies of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Viet Nam in their cradle and threatened the endangered 'Rising Tiger' economies of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The recovery placed a shadow on the hopes for the dawn of what many were speculating would be the 'Asian Century'. And Malaysia had no time to rest if it did not want its then forty years of progress from colonial servitude to have been in vain.

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The calm of the eye collapsed along with the front door of my house—which was unlocked, by the way. It was kicked in by masked, armed men with automatic weapons. My sacking and defamation had been only the beginning. Now I was under arrest.

Hours that could well have been days later, I awoke in a cell on an infernal level of Bukit Aman, the Royal Malaysian Police Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. Months of stress and struggle, especially from the last few weeks before I was dramatically arrested at home, had caught up with me all at once. Awake, I was exhausted.

Only one thing was allowed to me in my more or less immobilised condition. I turned to the jailer and asked in which direction was the *qibla*, the direction towards Mecca in which Muslims pray. A small spigot in my cell granted me the ability to perform my *wudu* or ablutions, the sacred washing Muslims undergo prior to doing their five daily prayers. It was the most difficult *wudu* I have performed to date. As I stood in the direction of Mecca, the sacred city, I took a deep breath, clearing my mind, and I did the one thing still allowed to an incarcerated man. I prayed.

On the other side of the eye of the storm a great deal of change stood before all of us, beyond the then all-consuming fear of the Y2K virus.² While technological advancement was expected to go the only way available, few would have been able to anticipate the impacts of the digital transformation and revolution on our doorsteps. Indeed, even in 1999, a US presidential election had consequences for the rest of the world. But few could have foreseen the stakes of the showdown between George W. Bush and Al Gore, especially in light of the terrorist attacks and ‘war on terror’ that were to follow. Meanwhile, much of the world had not come to terms with the trauma of colonialism or properly critiqued the postcolonial experience. Justice was not as easily accessible a commodity as our post-war, human rights

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aware contemporary world might have suggested. I was engaging this fact at first hand. Democracy had been taken for granted and nefarious people were taking advantage. Islam, the world's second largest religion, was a matter of deep ignorance for many around the world and it was about to be thrust into the spotlight on the world's stage. But that light was to be of a most unfavourable hue to those of us who were Muslim. And prior ignorance continued to arc towards further ignorance, even towards hate, xenophobia, and especially Islamophobia. All the norms and ways of thinking we had taken as given were also evaporating and would need to be replaced by novel and innovative approaches to what was increasingly becoming a postnormal world.

The famous black eye I received in prison became a symbol of *Reformasi*—reform.³ It was a new storm of long-overdue change for Malaysia. As storms in Malaysia and beyond gathered and raged outside the prison walls, personally I too faced protracted incarceration, but I could not allow it to eclipse the significance of the bigger picture: the struggle against the deep-rooted corruption and the abuse of office, between freedom and tyranny, in pursuance of justice, has punctuated the much longer story of my career. Its genesis lay in my scholarly pursuits which moulded my intellectual growth, initially focussed on the issues of poverty and societal welfare. This led to my first 'dalliance' with the 'draconian Internal Security Act (ISA)⁴ following demonstrations way back in 1974.

Hence, while my infamous 1998 sacking and imprisonment are well known, the fact is that 1998 was not my first time in detention. At the centre of an earlier gathering storm was the abject poverty of rural farmers in Baling, in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah. It was a cause with mass appeal to college and university students of the 1970s, like us. Baling's economy was made or broken on the rubber industry. The year 1974 was not fortuitous as harsh weather conditions hit the rubber harvests,

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tanking the market globally. Inflation was on the rise and the price of basic goods had rocketed outside the capacity of many of Malaysia's rural poor, most of whom were of Malay ethnicity. By November, farmers took to the streets. Adding fuel to fire, the parliament of the day saw fit to raise its own salaries. Then, the protests escalated. In Tasek Utara, a village in the southern state of Johor, farmers were protesting eviction from their homes and the price of basic goods. The protests escalated into December, when our coalition of students brought the demonstrations to such a level that the authorities felt a police crackdown was necessary. It was fast and furious. The upshot was my two years of detention without trial. I found myself at Kamunting Detention Centre, in the company of my compatriots, including the noted academic Syed Husin Ali.⁵

When I was released in 1976, only two years had passed but things had changed significantly. The administration that had seen to my detention had been dissolved. After the demise of Abdul Razak, his successor Hussein Onn became the third prime minister of Malaysia. Malaysia was under its third premiership. Saigon had fallen and the US had abandoned Viet Nam; the country was now fully communist. The first iteration of ASEAN held its first summit in Bali, Indonesia, in February, signifying a regional force to be reckoned with that pushed the ideals of peace and non-alignment. The leader of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong, had died a week before my release. Change had come to Malaysia, to Asia, and to the world. It even came for me personally. I was no longer a student. There could be no innocence of youth after my dance with the ISA. I returned to leading ABIM (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) with renewed vigour and firm determination. I had to change the way I was thinking. We all did. It would not suffice to allow change to be something that just happened to us, ready or not; change could be a force that we could usher in through agency and

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derive power from. Over the next few years, I took on my job with gusto, attending conferences and participating in international engagements. And while I came into my own during my activist days, the recollections of those lost along the way weighed on me. Those who had fought hard against the powers that be consistently arrived at two possible outcomes: either they capitulated along the way through one miscarriage of justice or another, or were pacified and put out to pasture in a dead-end university posting. The naivety of youth quickly justifies the noble fight. I no longer had that excuse. There had to be a different way. I worked hard to polish my intellectual acumen. I travelled the land, engaged with students, religious and community leaders, and built a large, close-knit network. Eventually, this network was broadened to an international arena of Muslim scholars and included noted academics such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ismail al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, and leaders of Islamic movements. At the same time, I engaged with representatives of the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth, and Hindu intellectuals. These conversations and discourses led to a simple realisation: while ideals must form the fundamental basis and rationale of our struggles, they will come to nought unless translated into actions. Eventually, I also reasoned that the best chance for true, substantial change and reform was to come from within, not from outside. So, I joined the ruling political party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1982; and proceeded to sink my teeth into the job of bringing change to my country.

In the 1980s and 1990s, change was shifted into top gear. My rise was a great education. While I had garnered a lot of conventional knowledge from my days as an activist, I was educated further, election by election and ministry by ministry. I am not a technocrat, but learned to heed the advice of those wiser on various matters. And beyond that, I always stayed connected to

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the people, eager to hear their desires and grant them access to their needs. The core principle of justice was always there. And where so many had been denied it, we needed new ways of getting it to the masses. I also learned the incredible power the state and education had in enabling us to take a stake in the change all around. And I had made true friends and taken many pages of wisdom from some of the brightest luminaries of our age. And although I had come so close, after my capricious removal from office, the option of change from within was no longer available to me. But I was not alone.

While the system which saw me plucked from the high offices of government and condemned to the bowels of prison could be described as being complicit in a perverse miscarriage of justice, the powerful elite of my country had become a parody of itself. A combination of greed and fear saw Malaysia become an international embarrassment of the hope once placed in our postcolonial project. The party that I lead, the People's Justice Party (PKR) or Keadilan, was established on 10 December 1998. After my release from prison in 2004, and equipped with a party of my own, I was confronted with a political scenario that was completely different.

'Cash is king'⁶ was the mantra of the ruling kleptocrats, celebrating with glee and gusto the looters of the state, as the then prime minister himself noted with hubristic pride. Corruption not only thrived, but it was also on full, blatant display. It was our gilded age of opulence, paraded unashamedly. Elites walked around as if they were demigods, untouchable, and answerable to no one. Cronyism, nepotism, favours had in spades. The 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) humiliation, which became the subject of an international corruption scandal in 2015, was a symptom of the disease.⁷ The nineteenth-century British historian Lord Acton was correct in his assessment of the corruptibility of power, but it also blinds inasmuch as the allure of riches and bounty are concerned.⁸ To be sure, this pervasive corruption

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would not have seen the light of day but for the complicity or sheer abandonment of moral rectitude of the elites. Meanwhile, the powerful ratcheted up innumerable skeletons from their closets and safely swept them under the carpet until they were uncovered by a series of exposés.

Through the 2008 and 2013 elections, we made great strides, as a united opposition, in spite of the overwhelmingly lopsided playing field. The entire machinery of the state was mobilised to suppress dissent and silence the voice of truth. Realising that these machinations did not yield the desired effect, they resorted to even more insidious subterfuge. The kleptocrats returned to their old bag of tricks and pulled out trumped-up charges. A media blitz was organised to display scurrilous allegations, utterly devoid of truth. All subtlety was abandoned as they set in motion the exact same measures that were used against me in 1998. The full force of the organs of the state rained down on me, culminating in my inevitable conviction. Undoubtedly, this was an upshot of the state powers working hand in glove with the judiciary. They might have wanted my career to end 'not with a bang but a whimper', as T. S. Eliot put it.⁹ But providence had other plans.

It was *déjà vu* all over again, but in a warped sense. There I was, in 2015, flying high in a wave of public support with bright prospects of attaining the highest office of the land, only to find myself hurled back to the position of 1998 and consigned within the walls of incarceration once again. Certainly, I did not expect prison to be a bed of roses. But neither did I expect it to be a bed of concrete. Quite apart from the unpalatable food and unhygienic living conditions, there was the psychological and emotional torture of being deprived of the one thing that could really sustain my sanity, let alone my intellectual well-being.

When I was in prison, deprivation of reading material was one of the chief attempts to inflict mental torture. Throughout my

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prison years, books were my constant companions. Reading was solace in a world that made little sense, denied the company of other people, of course beyond what company a prison guard can afford. In solitary confinement, rereading the Qur'an brought me great peace. But I am a voracious reader and, at the time, believed I had all the time in the world. It is not difficult to imagine the sorts of things that are often smuggled into prisons, but perhaps not very high on that imagined list are books. The twentieth-century philosopher Isaiah Berlin tells us that freedom is essentially the absence of constraints imposed by others.¹⁰ I am free to the degree to which no man interferes with my activity; political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. But viewed behind the walls of incarceration, shorn of philosophical abstraction, freedom takes on a completely different dimension. Thus, for me, freedom was simply the day my lawyer placed on the table before me my own copy of the Riverside Edition of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Friends would regularly send books which would then be smuggled in for me. Over time, I had built up quite a library in my prison cell. While works from the canons of world literature gradually accumulated around me, my most intimate companion and chief source of comfort came from the Bard himself. *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*—the list may look predictable, even hackneyed, but only if we see it from the frigid perspective of academia. In the stony silence of the night, when I had no one to talk to, Shakespeare's characters become more than mere *dramatis personae*.¹¹ They spoke to me and allowed me to speak to them.

During my incarceration in 1998, books on social justice, freedom and democracy, development and progress, were at the top of my reading list. From there, I moved on to the works of philosopher and poet Muhammad Iqbal, the Iranian thinker Ali Shariati, the Indonesian intellectual Muhammad Natsir, as well as Frantz Fanon, John Locke, Thomas Paine, and Alexis de Tocqueville.

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And there was an assortment of books of all shapes and ideas at the time of my first imprisonment in 1974. For us, the impressionable pupils of a new age—the supposed inheritors of the future—the 1970s were a confusing time. Ideas about development, how the ‘Third World’ and ‘developing countries’ could catch up with the West, were buzzing in every direction, and thousands of words written lay in wait for us to read them. I recall ploughing through the American scholar Daniel Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, the Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas’s *The Problem of Corruption*, and the Swedish Economist Gunnar Myrdal’s *Asian Drama*. The concept of postcolonialism—that is, we were now supposed to be in a postcolonial period—was prevalent. We expected to be free from colonial control and oppression. But we soon discovered, as Edward W. Said posited in *Culture and Imperialism*, that the West perpetuated colonial domination through art, literature, and culture.¹² This intellectual capture extended even to politics and economics. Alatas argued that wide-ranging Western dominance in the humanities, including development studies, is manifested in what he called the ‘captive mind’—an imitative susceptible and uncritical attitude bereft of independent thinking.¹³ Hence, it becomes vulnerable and easily surrenders to the onslaught of Western economic and social paradigms. But emancipation from Western cultural domination is not akin to rejection of the basic universal values of justice, freedom, and democracy.

For me, these are the navigational tools that could take us to a future of progress, social harmony, and prosperity. We should not conflate these values with the history of European colonialism, which was characterised by carnage, racism, and the plunder of the economic resources of colonised peoples. The values of justice, freedom, and democracy are not incompatible with eastern precepts of how societies ought to be governed. In Malaysia,

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which is multicultural and multireligious, these values intersect and are moulded into Asian values. Values of paramount importance in Islam, such as *ihسان* (virtue), *rahmah* (compassion), and *adl* (justice), have built civilisations of great import and influence throughout the world. But those left behind by the colonial masters as surrogate rulers, as well as the newly emerged class of nationalist elites, have uncritically rejected these values—falling prey to the toxic nature of the ‘captive mind’.

While in prison, I made copious notes on books that I had read, and my own reflections. When I was again incarcerated in 2015, I resolved to keep a journal of my intellectual forays with a view to writing a book. With this journal and earlier prison notes, I embarked on an initial draft. But after considering the approaches taken by Antonio Gramsci, the renowned Italian Marxist, and Nelson Mandela, I decided to produce a work of reflections on both my political and intellectual journeys. Between 1929 and 1935, Gramsci wrote around thirty notebooks during his imprisonment by the Italian fascist regime under Benito Mussolini.¹⁴ My own notebooks came to dozens of ‘exercise books’, which the prison guards allowed me to have, one by one, each stamped with a unique number. By their very nature, prison diaries tend not to be orderly, even less lucid, prose. Mine turned out to be as unsystematic and random as those of Gramsci, plus written in English, Malay, and sometimes a combination of the two, in a handwriting that has been described as notoriously illegible. Just as Gramsci drew inspiration from a string of writers and philosophers, from the left as well as the right, I too drew my inspiration from a wide range of thinkers, authors, essayists, and critics.

However, there is something about being confined to a small cell that forces you to focus on yourself and to think about the world outside. Gramsci reflected on the plight of the working classes, their educational and intellectual development, as well as cultural hegemony.¹⁵ In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr

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Solzhenitsyn looked at the lives of prisoners around him and examined the history of the Gulag.¹⁶ During my enforced sojourn in Sungai Buloh Prison between 2015 and 2018, my mind too was firmly focussed on the nature of oppression and tyranny, the fragile state of democracy and freedom, the moral upheaval of our times—the perilous state we find ourselves in! The world has changed, and is changing rapidly. Many things we took for granted are in a state of unrest—from the economy to democracy, politics to the sustainability of our environment. Climate change is set to wreak havoc throughout the globe. Indeed, the very notion of what it means to be human is being questioned, thanks to the rapid-pace developments taking place in bioengineering and artificial intelligence (AI). It is not one or the other, this or that, that we need to rethink, but everything that we might otherwise consider normal in our contemporary existence. Indeed, we need to rethink ourselves.

This book has its genesis in my prison jottings. The pandemic left a context that could not be ignored and necessitated a re-evaluation of the analysis, criticism, and my initial ideas. A piece of graffiti spray-painted onto the walls of a subway station in Hong Kong during the pandemic has stuck with me. Roughly translated, it read, ‘we can’t return to normal, because the normal that we had was precisely the problem’. In that normal, there is confounding poverty, mean-spirited discrimination, grave injustice, unbridled corruption, cheating, lying, and stealing. That normal gave us our political woes and our economic pains, took the people’s mandate and threw it back in their faces, and demanded mindless addiction to development and progress for progress’s sake. Meanwhile, our technology becomes our crutch as we stand unable to cope with the normal we so desired, and the machines do our thinking for us. I think we have surpassed the most horrifying scenarios that George Orwell or Ray Bradbury or the other great science fiction and speculative writ-

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ers could imagine. It is time for us to revive our creativity and our imaginations. To read more and think about what we read. To rethink our world and to rethink ourselves. As the British science writer Colin Tudge advocates, we need to rethink everything that we do and that we take for granted.¹⁷ This is tantamount to nothing short of a renaissance. It is only here that we can attain the reform and revision we have dreamed of for generations. And it is here that we can begin taking on the issues that have plagued us in the past to prevent them, along with other crises we might anticipate, from occurring tomorrow and for future generations.

We just might manage to navigate our way out of the numerous existential predicaments with firm resolve and commitment to see our hopes for the future become reality.

As the world changes, Anwar Ibrahim fuses personal struggle with political insight to envision a just, inclusive, and sustainable future

Change has run amok!

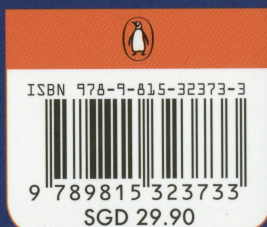
Technological advancement measures its frequency in minutes. Much of what we think we know about the world is fading in front of our eyes. How we are, how we know, and how we live our daily lives is changing quicker than we can cope with. We find ourselves in a confusing, uncertain, and volatile age—postnormal times—in need of new ideas to navigate.

Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's tenth Prime Minister, asks how we might rethink ourselves to adjust to accelerating change, and to shape more just and sustainable futures. His passion for truth and justice is rooted in his own experience: He has been behind bars for over a decade through three separate miscarriages of justice, from his days as a student activist to his time as Leader of the Opposition.

Woven through the reflections on his time in prison are critical investigations into justice, post-colonialism, Islamophobia, democracy, and world order. Anwar brings together the ideas of scholars and other thinkers from the East and West, North and South, to explore how we can create a new inclusive synthesis—one that genuinely promotes good society and a just and sustainable world order.

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Non-fiction



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