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Anwar Ibrahim: Forgiveness, character and values can rescue Malaysia

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Anwar returned to the political fray for the country's youth despite the threat of imprisonment; they can rebuild the country with principles and tenacity of purpose

When the Malaysian Court of Appeal overturned **Anwar Ibrahim**'s 2012 sodomy acquittal in 2014, it came as no surprise to the former and now Prime Minister-in-waiting. The then 66-year-old leader of the opposition was about to claim the powerful Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) post in the state of Selangor in which Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur, was located.

“A sitting federal court judge told me, ‘Anwar, my advice to you is to stay put in London, or the States, or Turkey or anywhere and don't return. I know for a fact that the federal court judges will convict you, never mind the facts and the law. Be realistic. You've suffered enough. Stay outside.’

“My response was this: ‘What about the young? The majority of the young support me and the cause. If I stay out, the young might say, ‘Yes he suffered, but what about us? Should we continue? If he cannot endure that, can we?’ My trust in the spirit of the young Malaysians compelled me to return, and return to jail for three-and-a-half years.”

“Forgiveness is a means to bring people back together”

Anwar made those comments in a Q&A session at the recent Ho Rih Hwa Leadership Lecture titled ‘Leadership in the 21st Century: Winds of Change’ at the Singapore Management University. Having been pardoned by the king following his Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition's general elections victory in May, the 71-year-old finds himself in the same

position before his legal trouble began two decades ago: waiting to take over the reins of power from mentor turned tormentor, Mahathir Mohamad.

“We entered into this arrangement because both of us are committed to reform,” Anwar explained, referring to the two one-time rivals joining forces. “I must give thanks to Mahathir, who’s now 93, taking this bold initiative to correct the excesses and ills which have inflicted so much harm on the country and economy.

“He thought there was no future for Malaysia under the old regime, so he said we should work together. We did that. We garnered in total about the same number of votes [as in 2013] but we managed to secure victory from other marginal seats. So here we are now, that’s how we won in 2018.”

"The act of forgiveness is a means to bring people back together especially when it demands more from ourselves than we could imagine giving."

He quipped, sparking laughter: “We won in 2013 [too], but we didn’t form the government. That’s the difference.”

In his lecture, the 71-year-old cited John F. Kennedy’s book, *Profiles in Courage*, which the former American president wrote while he was still a senator in 1955. While echoing Kennedy’s exhortation for leaders to embody “courage, conviction, and tenacity of purpose”, Anwar said “I would add compassion and forgiveness”.

“There are those who actively and deliberately seek to sow deep divisions among people in society. They may do it for political gain or maybe through ideologues. Whichever it may be, the people they target are the ones who stand to suffer the most from deep polarisation in their communities, the disappearance of trust and the appearance of hatred.

“This is why the act of forgiveness is a means to bring people back together especially when it demands more from ourselves than we could imagine giving. It’s a powerful antidote to fear and can be a force for rebuilding society and restoring hope.”

New economic policies to replace New Economic Policy?

Addressing years of mismanagement by previous regimes will occupy much of Anwar’s attention as Prime Minister, assuming he gains entry to parliament by winning the Port Dickson by-election on October 13. Rooting out the endemic corruption that culminated in the 1MDB fiasco will be key, but related to that is the New Economic Policy (NEP) that had morphed from a needs-based affirmative action initiative into an institutionalised vote-buying programme favouring the majority Malay population.

“It doesn’t mean we’ll marginalise the Malays who are concerned that this new change will put them at a disadvantage,” Anwar elaborated in response to a question from the floor about political equality. “Once you introduce any policy that is deemed to be discriminatory, even if it affects only a few, it’s not something we can defend in this day and age. For me, as a matter of principle it is wrong.

“In as far back as 2007, I proposed that the NEP be dismantled. Was it easy? No. Many of my Malay friends were upset because they thought I didn’t care enough for Malays’ welfare, that it would put them at a disadvantage, that they would not be able to compete.

“I said, ‘No. If your policy is to promote affirmative action, you have to continue to protect the poor and marginalised. The difference is that it’s not race-based but needs-based.’” He added:

“Our position on the economic view is clear: we must promote growth. That means Malaysia, or any country, must be attractive to foreign investors. We must be efficient, cut the red tape, stop excesses and corruption. Without growth and if the economy isn’t vibrant, we can’t be talking about affirmative action.

“Look at Malaysia. The remote areas in Sarawak and Kelantan, the people are poor. Dilapidated buildings, poor roads. You can’t be talking about meritocracy alone while ignoring those who are marginalised – Malays, Bumiputras, Chinese, or Indians.”

Politics and democracy

Malays’ concerns over Anwar’s stance on the NEP is a cause for the government’s relatively low approval rating of around 60 percent among the community; nationwide it is around 70 percent. While that is something for the veteran politician to tackle if and when he assumes national office, internal politics within his Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR or People’s Justice Party) for the deputy president post dominate news headlines.

“About the deputy presidency [contest between Rafizi Ramli and Azmin Ali]: What is the problem?” he asked in response to a question. “You have democratic elections. These are two personalities, both are smart, intelligent, [with a] good track record; why is that going to divide the party?

“The only solution is to have no contest, [in which case] I’ll just follow the North Korean method,” he mused jokingly, adding that “[i]n a democracy, you have to tolerate differences. You have accept the fact that people will campaign.”

He concluded: “It is my duty then, as president [of PKR], to bring them together and give a suitable role for the person who has been defeated in the party election. After all, this is an election among members of the family.

“The media speculates that I’ve lost control of the party and what not, but if I am to preach democracy, freedom and justice, and suddenly I say, ‘No contest’? I cannot [do that]!”

Values, principles, determination

With Mahathir scheduled to step down as Prime Minister in 2020, Anwar will be 73 when he takes office. Revealing that he listens to Adele and Sam Smith in an effort to relate to the youth – “Do you know them?” he asked moderator and SMU Chairman Ho Kwon Ping, who replied with a laugh and “no” – the former student activist appealed to the many students in the 1,200-strong audience to “never compromise on the core values and principles of what is just and what is fair”.

But for a man who has spent half of the last 20 years behind bars – “It gets more difficult as you get older” – perseverance will perhaps stand out as the defining attribute of Anwar. Quoting British philosopher Arnold Toynbee, he said:

“[M]an achieves civilisation, not as a result of superior biological endowment or geographical environment, but as a response to a challenge in a situation of special difficulty which rouses him to make a hitherto unprecedented effort.”

“That is precisely the message for the youth!” he urged. “You should carry this banner with clear assimilation and acquisition of knowledge but determination to do more for yourself, for your family, for your country, and for humanity.”