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Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power

KHOO BOO TEIK

Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2023.

This book, as its title clearly states, focuses on Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (2022–present). More precisely, it analyzes Anwar’s evolution ever since he first burst onto the scene as a student leader in the 1960s. To this end, the veteran scholar Khoo Boo Teik has put together a total of nine chapters covering themes as wide ranging as Anwar’s personal charisma and his concept of a “humane economy” in a highly engaging fashion. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the book is “neither a proper biography nor a full study of his politics and ideas” (p. xiv). Rather, *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power* draws on and synthesizes an eclectic mix of materials to illustrate how the incumbent prime minister shaped and was shaped by the broader political system. The book also taps into the expertise and insights of numerous sources, including several prominent figures in the Malaysian political and intellectual spheres.

Chapter 3 discusses the centrality of Islam to Anwar’s brand of politics. Much has been written on how Anwar advanced or betrayed Islam. Recent critiques challenge his 2023 decision to welcome a controversial Indonesian preacher, claiming that it contradicted the principles of moderate Islam (Mohd Faizal and Afra 2023). On the other hand, Anwar has also been criticized for supposedly underfunding Islamic-related programs and religious schools since becoming prime minister (Danial 2023). According to the logic outlined in Chapter 3, Anwar has had a rather long career, during which he has faced various challenges and ideological demands, leading him to come up with a matching Islamic approach or discourse. Rather than harping on some of his supposed missteps, it would be more astute to keep a proportionate perspective on the sociohistorical circumstances that he has had to contend with. Chapter 3 rightly highlights that the perception of Islam across the world (particularly in the West) has shifted noticeably over the years. For example, the international media has changed its depiction of Anwar from a “charismatic leader of an Islamic fundamentalist group to a globalist liberal” (p. 86). To shed light on this issue, the chapter analyzes five key phases of Anwar’s career. I am especially impressed by the research of Anwar’s time in Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM, or the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement). The effort devoted to retrieving and perusing Anwar’s speeches dating back to the 1970s is praiseworthy.

Parallel to the above is Chapter 4’s examination of Anwar’s economic management philosophy. As the chapter points out, very few analysts remember Anwar’s ideas on the economy and wider state-business relations during his first tenure as minister of finance (1991–98). Instead, perspectives centered on the political upheaval of the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis, which saw Anwar falling from grace, tend to be of a binary nature. Certain groups criticize Anwar for not only misunderstanding the nature of the downturn but also promoting a series of

unnecessarily deflationary policies that worsened the situation. Anwar's supporters see things differently: they argue that he was made a scapegoat for attempting to rid the system of a series of malpractices. Chapter 4 bridges this intellectual gap, going through a series of documents to unpack what was in Anwar's mind when he captained the Ministry of Finance. A personal favorite is its analysis of Anwar's budget speeches, where sagely advice from the likes of Ibn Khaldun and Wang An Shih is frequently cited. In the latter half of the chapter, other sources, including the oft-cited *The Asian Renaissance* (Anwar 1996), are scrutinized, contributing to a more balanced perspective on what is termed a "humane economy."

Those interested in Malaysian economic affairs will likely find contradictions between the discussion in Chapter 4 (and, by extension, the other chapters) and what Anwar has actually achieved since ascending to the prime ministership in late 2022. For instance, the early June 2024 decision to cut blanket diesel subsidies can be interpreted as a move that is less than humane or caring toward the underprivileged segments of society (see, for example, Hadi 2024). Another common complaint is the lack of traction of the much-touted Menu Rahmah, whereby food eateries are encouraged to offer meals at RM 5 targeting low-income earners. Launched by the Anwar administration in early 2023 with great fanfare, the budget meal scheme seemingly fizzled out within months (Amir and Bedi 2023). It is, of course, unfair to lay the blame squarely on Anwar. Much has changed between Anwar's heyday of the 1990s and the contemporary era. While the Malaysian prime minister must bear some responsibility for the issues raised by the electorate, some of the headwinds—such as the worldwide inflation caused by supply chain disruption in Eastern Europe and the Middle East—are ultimately exogenous in nature.

Notwithstanding its various merits, *Anwar Ibrahim* is not an easy read. It almost certainly assumes that the readership already possesses a fairly advanced understanding of Malaysian politics and history. At times, the chronology also intersects between different periods, which might confuse readers. The fluid timeline, in turn, is a result of the book's organization: its chapters are curated along rather broad themes. For those interested in Malaysia's (and, by extension, Anwar's) role in international affairs, such as this reviewer, it is a pity that there is no dedicated chapter on this topic. It would have been intellectually rewarding to understand how Anwar views developments such as an increasingly assertive China and the fragmenting global economic architecture, for instance. Exploration of the latter is especially intriguing, as Anwar proposed the establishment of an Asian Monetary Fund, seen in certain quarters as a geostrategic move to reduce reliance on the Global North-led Bretton Woods institutions, during his visit to China in March 2023. His proposal was well received not only by the Chinese financial authorities but also by their counterparts in the Global South (Lim 2023). More recently, Anwar has signaled an intention to join the BRICS grouping of emerging economies, of which China is a founding member (see Al Jazeera 2024). While it is too early to assert that these actions will eventually lead to an overdependence on China, some preliminary analysis is still valuable.

In summary, *Anwar Ibrahim* deserves plenty of credit as it offers an enriching perspective on an individual who is occasionally termed a “chameleon” (p. 48). Despite some minor gaps, which are understandable in undertakings of this sort, the book is a recommended source of information for both general and specialist readers interested in Malaysian, and even Southeast Asian, politics. Perhaps more important, it builds on Khoo’s (1995; 2003) earlier works on Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia’s longest-serving prime minister (1981–2003, 2018–20). In view of both Mahathir’s and Anwar’s stature in Malaysian politics, it would not be outlandish to claim that these works rank as some of the most foundational for aspiring analysts seeking to make sense of how Malaysia has ended up at the current juncture, in addition to the nation’s future trajectory.

For aficionados interested in more contemporary scholarship, *Anwar Ibrahim* is best read alongside two other freshly released monographs: *The End of the Nineteen Nineties* (Hafiz 2023) and *Sang Kancil: A Tale about How Ordinary Malaysians Defied the Odds* (Chai 2023). These two monographs might not pack the same intellectual or theoretical punch, but they offer a complementary (not necessarily contradictory) perspective to Khoo’s latest study. With Khoo devoting much attention to Anwar, it is inevitable that ordinary Malaysians are shunned in the analysis. If one were to be cynical, it could even be said that the side effect of focusing on the supposed “victors” of history is an effacing of the stories of underdogs, the easily overlooked people who have made a huge impact in Malaysian politics. Some of them might have been inspired by the likes of Anwar, but many are simply earnest believers who kept showing up, no matter what the circumstances may have been.

These people clearly matter, pushing change in their quiet, often unspectacular, ways, as noted by Hafiz Noor Shams (2023) and James Chai (2023). Chai’s (2023) down-to-earth storytelling, which explores the lives of seven ordinary Malaysians and how their ideals resonate with fellow citizens, is especially noteworthy. The seven people’s struggles and why and how they eventually overcame their challenges are heartwarming, simply because these people are as ordinary as one can get in the broad canvas that is Malaysian society. The gripping nature of their tales is reflected only occasionally in Khoo’s depiction of the prime minister, although one can argue that it is not the main driving force behind his motivation to write the book. The overarching point here is that whatever one might feel about the current (parlous?) state of affairs in Malaysia, it is undeniable that the Southeast Asian nation has achieved remarkable socioeconomic progress, surpassing that of most former developing economies. The impetus for such transformation emanates as profoundly from elites like Anwar as it does from the general populace.

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Indigenizing the Cold War: The Border Patrol Police and Nation-Building in Thailand

SINAE HYUN

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023.

The massacre of leftist student protesters at Thammasat University on the morning of October 6, 1976 is one of the most infamous events in modern Thai history. Thais and international journalists at the time were shocked by the extreme violence inflicted on the students, which included the use of snipers, anti-tank weapons, and M79 grenade launchers. Bodies of some of the dead students were burned and mutilated; one was even hung from a tree and beaten by a mob. Yet, strangely, in the Thai popular imagination the details of the event are rather blurry. Some Thais refer to the event as "16 October," a confused eliding of this event with the earlier