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IN CONVERSATION WITH ANWAR IBRAHIM (2)

His Vision, New Malaysia, Regeneration and the Region

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Yang Razali Kassim continues his conversation with Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's prime minister-in-waiting. In this second part, the president-elect of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the biggest component of the ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition, shares his thoughts on his vision, New Malaysia, succession and regeneration as well as Malaysia's place in the region.

Anwar's Vision

Yang Razali: We will assume therefore that, as agreed, you will be the 8th prime minister after Mahathir. As the next premier, what is your vision as prime minister?

Anwar: The issue is irrelevant for now. I support Pakatan Harapan's position to support Mahathir. When my time comes, I will articulate my views. For now it's better to support the present prime minister.

YR: When you take over?

Anwar: When I take over, party policies, Pakatan policies which I have to adhere to, then I will make the necessary adjustments at the right time.

YR: But as PM people expect you to have a vision.

Anwar: Yes at the right time, I will say it. Of course I got to do what I have to do. But for now, my task is to support the present prime minister.

YR: In other words, you are saying you have your own vision, just that you are not prepared to articulate it now?

Anwar: Not necessarily. Because the vision, the Pakatan Harapan policies and manifesto, are largely contributed by many of us. So we are part of it. So you want to know my views you have to read the party policies and Pakatan manifesto. It encapsulates much of the thinking.

New Malaysia

YR: Now people are talking about New Malaysia. Different people are saying different things. What's your conception of New Malaysia?

Anwar: Essentially we want to mature as a democracy. We want to strengthen the institutions of governance. Corruption is endemic. We want to stop the rot. Institutions, including (the issue of) judicial independence, now are openly debated. We have a former Court of Appeals judge lambasting the excesses of the party, which to me is an important development. The media is relatively free, more critical of the government, and more engaging. There's more discourse on a number of issues. So I think these are ingredients of a more mature democracy in Malaysia.

YR: The road to New Malaysia has come with some collateral damage. For example in the economy, there's been a shake-up of Khazanah, an important institution as a sovereign wealth fund. As a result, it is said, there's been some loss of talent. Industry people say they have difficulty hiring the right people to lead key institutions. How do you think this can be addressed?

Anwar: I don't share that view. Any prime minister who assumes office will have every right to make some changes. Most countries have that. Some (who have left) are competent people. They will survive in the private sector in their new positions. Khazanah is a good example. But they have replaced with Shahril (Ridza Ridzuan as new managing director) who is equally competent. So let him manage the affairs. If he is smart he can consult those people from the past because they were not all treated as enemies. None of them were charged.

We want to make sure they get the right signal, that Khazanah should remain purely as a business entity tied to the government. But I don't believe that because we have removed (some), therefore we don't have the people. The Tan Sris and the top guy are there.

Succession & Regeneration

YR: When you take over as prime minister do you see it important to have a new generation of leaders with you, the successor generation of leaders?

Anwar: Of course. It's only natural. We need to have some people with experience and we have to inject new blood. We need to do that. The strength that you see in Keadilan compared to the BN parties of those days, we have these young leaders entrusted with key positions in the party, in parliament, in Selangor in particular,

given that experience and exposure. Not necessarily positions in government but you see in the party, in parliament, people in the 30s and 40s.

YR: Who are the young leaders who are likely to be going forward with you in the new era?

Anwar: You can pick at random. Ten to 15 MPs who were competent. You have seen them debate, you have seen them work. You have seen them articulating issues. I am quite impressed with the core of 10-15 people to choose from. I am talking about the second tier of leaders, or younger. The senior leaders of course are known. So unlike in other parties, in Keadilan some key positions are assigned to the younger leaders.

YR: When you talk about a generation of young leaders who will lead the country with you, you need more than PKR to provide that. Do you see young leaders as well in the other parties?

Anwar: You see more in the DAP too. The rest are relatively newer parties.

Malaysia in the Region

YR: Later as PM, how would you position Malaysia in the region? Your relationship with your immediate neighbours Singapore, Indonesia, even Thailand – bilateral relations with Singapore are very important. As the new PM later, how would you handle that?

Anwar: The general thinking, the consensus is to establish strong bonds, very close cooperation. Singapore is exceptional because of historical, economic, trade, cultural (factors). What we would like to see is that happening. Similarly with Indonesia, Thailand, we have established and we should continue this. With Singapore specifically, we would like to see more exchanges, notwithstanding some of the initial problems that we have. I think beyond that – government, civil society, students, investment, trade. Everything should be done to cement this relationship. Both countries will need each other.

YR: The return of Tun Mahathir as PM has somewhat revived some old difficulties between Malaysia and Singapore, such as over water and now HSR. They were smooth-sailing under former premier Najib. Do you think this relationship will improve in the years after Prime Minister Mahathir?

Anwar: It will improve. But I think it is not just because of Mahathir. I think if you see the relationship under (then) prime minister Najib at that time as good, it's not necessarily something positive, because some deals are suspect, dubious. Some of the positions taken by Singapore, the political views, are considered by many particularly those in the opposition (then) to be excessive. But I think we have to move on. So it is quite right for Mahathir to raise those issues. But I think what is important is to continue to engage to try to resolve and move beyond these two issues. Bottomline is we have to work together.

I have said this earlier to (then) PM (Goh) Chok Tong at that time. For Singapore the problem is we in Malaysia take it like...how to say it...not so business-like, but also (stress) the cultural angle, which we feel that Singapore lacks – strict dollars and cents, rule and order.

I mean you work among neighbours, the relationship should transcend that a bit. But I don't think that it is something substantial, too prohibitive in terms of forging that sort of relationship. The initial visit by Prime Minister (Lee) Hsien Loong gave a signal that he wants to move on, to forge this sort of good relations with Malaysia. I can sense Malaysian leaders are encouraged to visit (Singapore), no inhibitions. Similarly Singapore leaders are coming regularly, which I think is a good signal.

YR: You are saying that it would be better if Singapore becomes less business-like?

Anwar: No, I am saying Singapore as a country is built on that ruggedness. I am not questioning that. But I think realities are realities – the socio-cultural fabric (is) something we tend to be more relaxed about.

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