

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

IN CONVERSATION WITH ANWAR IBRAHIM

On Mahathir, Reconciliation & Political Transition

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

On Malaysia's National Day recently, Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's prime minister-in-waiting, received RSIS Senior Fellow Yang Razali Kassim at his office near Kuala Lumpur. In this first of a two-part conversation, he talks about his relationship with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, reconciliation between them and Malaysia's political transition.

Mahathir-Anwar Reconciliation

Yang Razali: GE14 was historic. It was a people's revolt via the ballot box, leading to peaceful regime change. What made it all possible was the surprising political reconciliation between Tun Mahathir and yourself. How deep, how sincere, is this reconciliation?

Anwar Ibrahim: It's not only about being politically expedient. It was a decision based on a clear agenda for reform. Whatever one may say for or against Mahathir, he has shown remarkable commitment to the cause. He worked indefatigably hard to convince the masses. Although he may stress more on 1MDB and Najib (Razak, the former prime minister) he was carrying the entire agenda (for reform).

Because I've seen that for the last year, I have no reason to doubt that he is committed. You have seen some of the changes, you have seen the media in this country. But of course there are the old forces closely aligned to the (previous) administration that still want to do the old...that's why I cautioned against UMNO 2.0, which has upset quite a number of people. But that's a fact.

From my continual regular exchanges with Tun Mahathir, I sense his willingness to share and listen. That's the way trust is built. So I would accept certainly that although we worked very hard as the (then) opposition for a long time, his role, at the critical period, juncture, particularly the last month, should be commended as critical to the success (of PH).

YR: Your open public statements on Mahathir endorsing his leadership, acknowledging he played a critical role in the electoral swing towards PH, were statesmanlike. Do you think this reconciliation will last until you take over as PM?

Anwar: We have worked for one year (together) and there has been no rift, (not) any serious flaws. Of course there are many "experts" who give their own views – like "there's no way this is going to work", "that Najib is invincible". Experts are experts, but they also have limitations. Finally there was a groundswell and finally the people decided for themselves. Similarly, about this transition—whether Anwar is going to assume; the foreign experts signalled here and there. But I have no reason to doubt. Mahathir's been very consistent on this.

What's more important is this: unlike an UMNO rule, this is a coalition. I work with my coalition. I know exactly where they stand. Our stand is that Tun Mahathir should be given the latitude, space to continue with the task. But this is a democratic environment. People can choose to be critical and he should welcome that. But it's important that the transition should be peaceful, that he should be given the space, the latitude to embark on action against perceived or real excesses of the past, and to start rebuilding the institutions. My duty is to support.

Political Transition

YR: Has Tun Mahathir ever indicated to you when exactly he will step down, to hand over to you? There have been conflicting signals on the timing.

Anwar: No, we have serious discussions but I don't worry at all about it. My only remarks to him is: Look, you should feel free and not be tied to this sort of period. Because period was never stated from the beginning. Some people give different interpretations – six months, one year, one and half years, two years or more. I don't think that's an issue, to my mind. What is important is my understanding with him.

YR: But that leaves some vagueness, some lack of clarity, don't you think?

Anwar: The only clarity about that is that he becomes a lameduck prime minister. I don't want that. I want him to be an effective prime minister... But then what is important is that Mahathir encourages people to do that (talk to Anwar)... Foreign visitors, ministers (have been told)...okay you can update Anwar, which is to me a very good signal. I shouldn't expect more than that. In so far as position in government is concerned, I've said to him I am not prepared to serve in any position in government. Make things easy, and make things easy for me too. I can travel, see friends, can relax, can use *capal* (Malay sandals) wherever I go.

YR: But paradoxically within that flexibility lies the pitfalls, that's where speculations come in...

Anwar: Even if you have a definite date, Yang, do you think there will not be speculation? (Suppose), okay I (say I) am taking over 1st January next year, people will speculate. To me it's a non-issue. What is important, which is most critical, is my relationship with him, not what I hear from my diehard supporters, not what he hears from some of his old colleagues. It doesn't matter. He has given me excellent access. At 12 o'clock, four o'clock, I am there at his office.

YR: *At least within the agreement on the handover, is there any mention of, say, a maximum of one-term as prime minister before he hands over, or retires?*

Anwar: To do justice to Mahathir, he is 93. He has never indicated that he...didn't want (to hand over). There are some, as usual (who would want) to please him, and the same people may come to see me and say, 'Anwar why don't you assume earlier?'. But we are mature enough. We have gone through that. So I don't think it will make any difference.

YR: *It was reported today -- which gave clarity -- that you wanted people not to break both of you up, to be pitted against each other. The message is that there have been people who have been pitting you and Tun Mahathir, and that you want that to stop. So is that not the key problem -- there are third forces that actually want to split the two of you up? As long as both of you have that close understanding, that partnership will provide the stability, no?*

Anwar: It is working, it is stable. It is only those who speculate, here and overseas, who may think otherwise. Where is the instability? I told him the entire force, the entire Keadilan, is completely at his disposal. You should not then restrict people. There are court intrigues in the past. There are third forces, fifth columns, it's there! The most important thing is what he decides, what I decide, and what the party, the coalition decides. Remember no single party musters the majority (of) seats in Parliament.

YR: *What is also important is that Mahathir does not begin to distrust you. Because that's when the cracks will begin, yes?*

AI: These are speculations. If I start (saying) I distrust Mahathir, (and that) Mahathir distrusts (me), you won't have 100 percent trust. What's important is the working mechanism, working parameters. The understanding is important. For example, this important (upcoming Bumiputra) Congress. We decided that we have to be seen to be together, we should share the same views. But of course, he knows me, I am not going to be a parrot of what he says. But the broad parameters can be agreed upon.

YR: *That leaves it to the two of you to make statements to clarify, and clear the air, no?*

Anwar: We've made numerous statements. My party leaders (met) his party leaders, DAP its never an issue. The issue is outside the camp, in the fringes. We listen of course. Honestly I don't consider this a major thing. I hear from some neighbouring countries their concerns, this and that. I said okay, but they have been proven wrong many times already.

In Part 2 later, Anwar Ibrahim talks about his vision, his idea of New Malaysia as well as regeneration, and the country's place in the region. This two-piece Conversation is part of an RSIS series on Malaysia's 14th general election and its aftermath.

Click [HERE](#) to view Part 2 of this commentary.

Click [HERE](#) to view this commentary in your browser.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg