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The Asian Renaissance

By Anwar Ibrahim. Malaysia: Times Books International, 1996, 159pp.

It is not my habit to make public statements on political leaders and I usually prefer to hold my views private. But with my close friend and brother, Anwar Ibrahim, the deputy prime minister and finance minister of Malaysia, I have no hesitation. I have known him for over 20 years and he has always been a model of virtue because he combines truthfulness with sincerity. This shows in his actions both personally and professionally. From being an idealistic young man he grew into one of the most important political leaders of Malaysia. The good qualities he had when he was a promising young leader have not left him, inspite of the withering effect politics can have on one's character. Anwar is now just as honest and sincere, humble and charitable as he was when I first met him over 20 years ago. Throughout this time, he has been strict with himself and generous with others, demonstrating a true nobility. Above all, he has striven according to the dictum that "there is no right superior to the right of truth."

Unfortunately, too few people have striven for the truth which Anwar has pursued, leading us to the crisis in the world today. In the East, failure to think has lead to passive decay while in the West, thinking too much and often wrongly

has lead to active decay. Anwar is neither willing to sleep over the truth, nor live in error, and he strives against both in his new book, *The Asian Renaissance*. In it, he argues for action based on wisdom and sets out many of his visions and policy positions in a finely composed and edited collection of speeches and articles that he has delivered over the last few years. Anwar argues against replacing the passive decay of the East with another ideology that is full of errors and leads to false activity. Anwar is unique in seeking to oppose these false ideologies with the wisdom of the East. To the proponents of dynamism for its own sake, Anwar responds that dynamism can never be meaningful or effective outside the truth "pure and simple." He recognizes that it is senseless to substitute one error for another, whether it is "dynamic" or not. The first thing he does when he arrives at any new post is intensive study and coursework from both traditional and contemporary sources, following the wisdom to "seek knowledge even if it be in China." One must strive for the truth before strength and efficacy, and must apply knowledge sincerely. He knows that if a truth does not give strength, one has not really grasped it. Anwar recognizes that it is necessary to be dynamic in the light of the truth, not to change the truth to justify inaction.

In the opening chapter, Anwar argues that eternal truths guide action. He points out that the "Renaissance" referred to in the book's title does not imply imitation of the European Renaissance; rather, it refers to the spiritual reawakening of the eternal truths lying dormant in the East. In fact, the Asian Renaissance opposes the European Renaissance, which attempted to resurrect the Promethean man in his rebellion against Heaven "as an agent independent of the theological and natural order" (p. 18). Anwar argues that this is an inversion of the Islamic concept of man as God's vicegerent on earth (*khalifat Allah fi al-ard*), as well as the Confucian *jen* and the Christian "*Imago Dei* or *Pontifex*, the bridge between Heaven and earth" (p. 18). As his broad range of references from different religious traditions demonstrates, Anwar believes that the theosophies of Asia, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the wisdom therein, as well as the impact of Islam in the region give the Asian Renaissance a strong spiritual foundation on which to build civilization. He recognizes that the Truth uniting all religions is God, the Absolute, and that everything relative is attached to the Absolute—corresponding to the two fundamental witnesses in Islam: "There is no divinity but Allah" and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." In this sense, Anwar discerns that more than one civilization has approached the "mountain of truth," and that it has more than one side to be seen. Some people may cynically argue that Anwar's position is politically motivated; however, I know that he has held the same position since he was a young idealist when he asserted that God has sent prophets to every nation.

According to Anwar, Asia's spiritual foundation is intrinsic to the renaissance now underway. It stands in direct opposition to the secular view that the Asian Renaissance is based upon a rejection of spiritual principles and that the "mountain of truth" uniting the religions must be denied to make the East "dynamic." Anwar opposes this proposal for active decay by arguing that the Asian Renaissance is sustainable only by the application of truth, not error, to a new environment. He applies this vision to the social, political, and economic realms in the follow chapters. The guiding principle from which Anwar

derives policy for all areas of life is the truth that man is *homo viator*, or "a being created for a higher purpose."

In the second chapter, Anwar describes the dialogue and symbiosis between the East and the West. In this regard, Anwar strives not to compromise the truth in his criticism of both. Indeed, any act of criticism based on spiritual principles is an act of charity in the profoundest sense, and Anwar seeks to deliver it here. Some Muslims are afraid to tell the truth out of fear of appearing discourteous, or showing poor *adab*. However, the Prophet had perfect *adab* and asserted the Truth in a direct and open manner. He never sacrificed Truth for the sake of *adab* and I believe Anwar endeavors to follow the ethics of prophethood in this matter. He points out the weaknesses of both the East and the West and the need for one to learn from the other. Anwar suggests that the West can benefit from the traditional wisdom of the East to replace its false activity with a true rest. He also suggests that the East should replace its false rest with a true activity guided by spiritual principles, and calls for a dialogue between East and West. However, a dialogue requires two parties who believe they can learn something from the other. While many believers from the different faiths are ready for constructive dialogue, I do not believe the secularists are humble enough yet to learn from the people of traditional wisdom. There is little room for dialogue when one party is full of itself.

In the third and fourth chapters, Anwar moves to the political and legal domains, respectively, where he has served so admirably. Concerning politics, Anwar maintains that one cannot postpone or avoid the question of man's ultimate aim and purpose. Indeed, politics regulates man's common or social life, and man is dependent upon support from the community. It follows that either one recognizes God as the Absolute and pursues politics mindful of the eternal destiny of man or one believes that there are no higher obligations, leading one to fall under the attraction of Machiavellianism in which politics is the art of taking and maintaining power for private gain. There is no supportable middle position as the secular humanists claim because there is no good-will without God. Anwar, therefore, argues for democracy and justice based on spiritual principles. He suggests that these principles require one to fulfill one's duties, not simply to insist on rights, and that the secular argument for unconditional rights without responsibility leads to the destruction of society and the loss of authentic democracy. "He who does not observe the rights of God is bound to abuse the rights of the people." Anwar envisions that a democracy based on spiritual realities will look quite different from its sentimental, secular counterpart.

A brief cautionary note is in order here regarding Anwar's selection of quotes from various Western sources which are included in the English edition. The reader should not interpret Anwar's favorable quotation of a given individual as an endorsement of the person's argument. For example, Anwar quotes John Locke favorably regarding the "inviolability of human life and property" (p. 52). However, Locke was also the father British empiricism and denied the epistemological basis of knowing the traditional truths which guide Anwar's spiritual approach to policy. Starting with a passionate error, Locke proceeds logically to conclusions on politics that are nevertheless passionate opinions and may accidentally coincide with reality. In quoting such opinions, Anwar endorses the conclusion based on spiritual realities, not the flawed argument leading to the quoted conclusion. In this sense, it would be pre-

ferrable to qualify favorable quotations from these sources to avoid confusing readers who are not familiar with the arguments behind them.

In chapters five and six, Anwar moves to the economic domain in which he has achieved so much success. He argues that the separation of ethics and economics is false, and that all activities should be integrated around a "Sacred Center." Anwar denies that economic choices can be reduced to quantitative considerations, and that different ends exist qualitatively. Secular economics abstracts from God and attaches all things to utility, making the relative absolute and limiting economics to quantitative considerations of "more" or "less" utility while denying the qualitative existence of intrinsic "good" and "evil." Anwar opposes this, arguing that economics is applied ethics that addresses the qualitative choices man must face as *homo viator*, and as representative of God whose choices conform to His design for the world.

While chapter five focuses on comparative economics, chapter six focuses on specific areas of concern for social welfare, such as productivity, taxation, and privatization. Anwar has an impressive track record in this area. Serving as finance minister during a period in which Malaysia grew dramatically, he instituted policies that ensured that the poor were not left out of this prosperity. He introduced low-cost housing and worked with businesses to arrange for interest-free loans to ensure that the needy had suitable homes. His concern with ethics and his unwillingness to neglect those who were not powerful enough to stand up for themselves prove his sincerity. His stellar performance earned Anwar the confidence of Western leaders. Former prime minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher, noted, that if Britain wants a solution to its economic problems, then Britain should borrow Anwar.

Finally, Anwar concludes his book with chapters on culture, Islam in Southeast Asia, and Asia in the future. Throughout these chapters, he applies the spiritual principles set forward at the beginning of the book to resolve problems and answer questions in each area. Although believers may sincerely draw different implications from the truth that God is the Absolute and all things are attached to God, no sincere believer can dispute that this is the right approach to respond to the passive and active decay of both the East and the West. Anwar argues that this is the only basis on which the Asian Renaissance can be sustained.

Perhaps the main lesson of *The Asian Renaissance* is that there should be no activity outside the truth. Although this may not guarantee success, it is the first principle of action. I know Anwar has always striven to fulfill his duty without asking whether he would be successful or not—his faithfulness to principles has its own intrinsic value. The logically and spiritually correct activity which Anwar strives for can have incalculable effects in the spiritual reawakening of the East. It can also provide a truly spiritual model for the West. One of my friends said that Anwar's book is the region's manifesto for the 20th century. I think he was right.

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