

BOOK REVIEW

Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power by Khoo Boo Teik.
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Following Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14) of 2018, Malaysia saw the rise of promising democratic practices – a two-party system; reform of the judiciary; breakdown of the 60-year old Barisan Nasional (BN) regime; multi-party coalitions; vibrancy of the (social) media and civil society; alongside the upsurge of rising ethno-religious politics. In the aftermath of the 2022 GE15, Anwar Ibrahim became Malaysia's 10th Prime Minister. Underscoring the political changes, the Malaysian political landscape has been filled with tremendous political upheavals, and the commitment to promising democratic openings remains as a challenge.

The publication of the book entitled *Anwar Ibrahim: Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power* by Khoo Boo Teik (hereafter Khoo) is ripe as a reminder to readers to seek for clues or contexts on Anwar himself in analytical perspectives on contemporary Malaysian politics and society, instead of relying on hearsays, conspiracy theories, or simply false accusations. From an individual's political journey, how do we comprehend Malaysian political changes critically? The book is not a mere writing of an autobiography; it brings context to who is Anwar, and why he took such stances and decisions during the most turbulent period of his political career, within the setting of Malaysian politics and society. There are three vital contexts and perspectives that construct the book's arguments in juxtaposing Anwar's political journey with that of Malaysia's polity, namely the class power that enveloped the oligarchic elites vis-à-vis the proletariats; the political protests and fermentation since the 1998 *reformasi* period that “[Anwar] came to embody [as] a dissent alternative” (p. 5); and the parlous Malay politics that followed in

which Anwar necessitates a new order of things amid political chaos during the post-pandemic period.

To both the critiques and advocates of Anwar, Chapters One and Two provide the contexts for Anwar's political strategy, survivalism, and ideological discourses such as the Asian Renaissance (pp. 68–78). The chapters reveal the persona of Anwar, and why and how Anwar acts out his political passages and strategies by contextualising and juxtaposing Malaysian political changes and development. The ideological making of Anwar, according to Khoo's analysis, started in 2004 – an important year of Anwar's charisma making (pp. 44–48). The triumph of BN/United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in the 2004 GE constructed three political scenarios – the “undirected mass disaffection, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)'s static structure, and fragmented opposition front,” (p. 45) which significantly required a condition for political leadership of the then fledgling opposition coalition, and “Anwar fulfilled that condition” (p. 46).

An interesting point raised by Khoo is plebeian politics (pp. 21–27). In Malaysian political studies, there is a lack of analysis on this aspect of mass politics. Anwar's anti-establishment politics derives from his culmination of mass politics throughout his political life and, as such he constructed an alternative vision of political dissent vis-à-vis political suppression, authoritarian rules, and oligarchy politics. Khoo brings forward Anwar's Permatang Pauh Declaration (pp. 24–27) to compare and contrast Anwar's vision to that of Mahathir's authoritarian rule. Anwar's politics brings in an alternative political discourse which is populist, people-oriented, anti-oligarchic, and reformist (pp. 27–33). Such plebeian politics shapes Anwar's populist politics as illustrated in Chapter Five, with “practical resolutions” (p. 197) in GE12 (2008) and GE13 (2013). The arrogant UMNO-BN-led regime disregarded the dissent from the masses, which led to three major demonstrations in Malaysia's political history, namely the Walk for Justice, BERSIH, and HINDRAF protests which formed a convergence of dissent (pp. 205, 223–227), building a common ground among the masses with anti-oligarchic resonance (p. 205). The last section of Chapter Five – “Rethinking Nation” (pp. 227–238) sums up accurately the blending of political structures and changes in Malaysia with Anwar's populist style and position of power conditioned by dissents and consensus (p. 237). Anwar's populism is sensitive to the Malaysian context with different nuances that “they shared the quality of being serviceable to broad cross-class appeal rather than class-based mobilization” (p. 227) – a political formula that serves as an alternative dissent inclusive of all walks of life.

I am intrigued by Khoo's class power approach (Harvey 2006) in historicising class formation in the 1980s and the consistency of class

dominance in the political coup of 2020. Chapter Six discusses the “coup” of Perikatan Nasional (PN) from Pakatan Harapan (PH). As finance minister (1991–1998) (discussed in Chapter Four), Anwar accommodated through the post-1989 structural adjustment of recession and pessimistic market conditions, muddling through Mahathir’s statist aspirations of developmental vision and delicately negotiating the oligarchic agenda associated with Daim Zainuddin (p. 156). The struggle in bailing out the economy in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian currency crisis, had not merely to do with the divergent views between the Mahathir-Daim pact and Anwar. Framed within the political economy of Malaysia that commenced during the 1980s and 1990s economic growth under the Japanese production network scenario (Ernst 2006), with the subsequent establishment of “oligarchy” rules in politics and the economy, the leadership conflict of Mahathir’s approach was “nothing less than class survival – for saving the commercial world of the corporate elites from disintegrating” (p. 251). This class power approach extends to Khoo’s analysis of Mahathir’s “mode of change” in supporting PH against the Najib-led UMNO regime in GE14 (2018). “[Mahathir] sensed two threats to the elite, corporate, and oligarchic interest of which he was the patron” (p. 258). Alas, the subsequent “plebeian-oligarchic alignment,” which symbolises the realignment between Anwar and Mahathir that gave rise to the 22-month old PH-led government that collapsed in 2020 in the so-called Sheraton Move. Khoo asserts that Mahathir’s withdrawal from the PH coalition was to re-organise the political power into his hand (which he failed), primarily to preserve his class power from the unbearable burden of an anti-oligarchic reform (pp. 275–279).

Another dimension of Khoo’s analysis is the “parlous Malay politics.” It brings the readers away from the psychological and personality perspectives to understand the “... current conjuncture of Malay politics....” (p. 288), which can be identified in four facets, namely, the absence of “Malay unity”, the unresolved claim to represent the Malays, inter-party contention, and subverted leadership transitions (pp. 288–291). Again, the analysis of class power comes into play in Khoo’s book. Chapter Seven relates this parlousness of Malay politics with the failure of the Malay political class to construct an authoritative political settlement to sustain pre-1997 Malay political hegemony, namely the New Economic Policy (NEP)-Vision 2020 Order (see pp. 299–304 for the analysis). The genesis of the parlousness of Malay politics derives from the “peculiar development of political economy that transformed UMNO’s original *raison d’être* of Malay nationalism into a corporate imperative of Malay capitalism” (p. 295). It syncs well with the post-2008 Malaysian (read: Malay) political landscape whereby when times are good, UMNO or Malay politics remains strong in holding its hegemony; when in slender times, the “state-party-class axis” (p. 295) formula collapses. As such, when the Anwar-led government institutes “pro-market and good governance

measures, that is anti-statist and anti-oligarchic “best practices” that might leave uncompetitive Malay businesses unprotected,” (p. 296) the emergence of intense intra-Malay rivalry took place. The chapter provides context on the post-2020 political scenario on the political tussles among Malay political elites namely Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM)’s Muhyiddin, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS)’s Hadi, and UMNO’s Zahid, for readers to grasp subsequent struggles of Anwar to muddle through the post-2022 political scenario of the parlous Malay politics. As such, this calls for a political settlement to bring back the order of things. This is the major challenge to Anwar’s “Unity Government” – how would Anwar “craft a fresh political order to keep his regime in power until the next general election”? (p. 341). This is dealt with in Chapter Eight on Anwar’s creation of a new political order, the “Malaysia Madani: SCRIPT for a Better Malaysia – An Empowering Vision and Policy Framework for Action.” Khoo provides a summary of Malaysia Madani not as an electoral or political stratagem for power, but as “spurring reform” (p. 346) that emphasises sustainability, care and compassion, innovation in the socioeconomic domain, the significance of trust in institutional reform, a humane economy that deflates the neoliberal economy (pp. 346–352). While Malaysia Madani serves as a sociopolitical reform vision, the Budget 2023 Speech (pp. 352–366) serves as an economic framework of Anwar’s administration, as a glimpse into Anwar’s humane economic reform.

With the Prime Ministership that Anwar has finally gained, there are two major challenges to Anwar’s administration. While holding on to promises to curb corruption, how Anwar compromises with his deputy, Zahid Hamidi (who was facing several corruption charges before being granted dismissals without acquittal), the President of UMNO which serves as a major partner in the unity government coalition. Another challenge is Anwar’s role to smuggle in between the government’s programme his reformist agenda which transcends racial and oligarchic barriers (p. 380). Anwar must cautiously “bring about that sense of confidence in the Malays’, and for that he needs first ‘to reassure the Malays that they would not be marginalized’” (p. 383). These conditions highlight the complexities and uncertainty of Malaysia’s political development; equally significant is the challenges that Anwar needs to negotiate (and survive) under these unstable political scenarios.

The way I read the book is that the author sympathises with Anwar with respect to the complexity and uncertainty of the ongoing changes in the Malaysian political landscape, and to its chaos and vulnerability. Khoo’s book could have added another level of analysis, which is the sentiment of the non-Malay polity including Sarawak and Sabah on Anwar’s administration and the Madani Government. Malaysian politics is akin to a wave that ebbs and flows between liberal democracy

that potentially can be realised via Anwar's reform agenda or Malaysia Madani and the embryonic ethno-religious and daily survival complex that is predominantly faced by the Malaysian populace. This requires wisdom instead of mere political stratagems to make a new political order in a multiethnic and multicultural polity. This is a book worth reading to comprehend an individual's life struggles and how events have shaped and are being shaped into Anwar's political journey. It provides contexts and analysis to grasp Malaysian political events and changes within the frame of class power and the politics of dissent that follows.

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