
Interview: Education Minister Anwar Ibrahim



'To promote equity in Malaysia, we are promoting growth'

The following profile of Malaysia's minister of education is an attempt to broaden our readers' horizon on Malaysia and its political leadership, often portrayed by the international media as run by a "dictatorial" Prime Minister Dr. Mohammed Mahathir, or as a mere producer of palm oil and rubber. Biographical information on the minister is taken largely from the book by J. Victor Morais, *Anwar Ibrahim: Resolute in Leadership*, and current situations are from an interview *EIR* Bangkok bureau chief Sophie Tanapura conducted with Minister Anwar Ibrahim on Sept. 19 in Kuala Lumpur.

Born on Aug. 10, 1947 at Cerok Tokkan, Bukit Mertajam, Anwar Ibrahim comes from a family which has long been familiar with the demands of a political career. His father is Waji Ibrahim Bin Abdul Rahman, a former member of Parliament and Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Health. Anwar had his early education at the Sekolah Kebangsaan, Cerok Tokkan and later at Stowell School. It was here that he began what has become one of his lifelong aims—to apply Islamic principles to the solution of the nation's problems. He continued his education in the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, in 1960-66. In 1967, he enrolled for a degree in Malay studies at the University of Malaya. By 1968, he was president of the Malay Language Society and president of the National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students.

All through the 1970s, despite repeated invitations to join the governing party UMNO, Anwar preferred to pursue an independent political course, but in 1982, to everyone's surprise, he finally joined UNMO. In 1983, after having served as deputy minister in the prime minister's department, he became Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports. Later, he held the post of agriculture minister, before becoming education minister two years ago. Among potential contenders for the premiership after Dr. Mahathir, Anwar Ibrahim is mooted to be the most likely candidate. He is also vice president of UMNO Baru.

Minister Anwar spoke to *EIR* of his deep concern with the political crises that have swept Asian nations from the Philippines to South Korea, all in the name of "democracy." He had thought to himself, he confided, that perhaps Malaysia was slated to be the next target for destabilization, but instead, Burma exploded first. Minister Anwar expounded:

"Those who are clamoring for democratic changes do not share in democratic sentiments except to present their narrow view of certain aspects of political economic policies or programs. Those who champion the 'democratic' cause are often not democratic within their own political parties or their bodies. They have never been seen championing peoples' rights except when it fits their scheme or strategy. But what is more damaging, to my mind, is that they use slogans such as 'democracy' to promote specific leftist, socialist programs. These opposition groups take up a position as if the situation here in Malaysia were so undemocratic, assuming that this must be oppressive, dictatorial, and uncompromising."

Aliran, a small "human rights" organization in Malaysia, which has been promoting liberation theology, Islamic fundamentalism (or "fanaticism" as it is referred to in Malaysia), environmentalism, and drugs, has been given prominent coverage in the international press as spearheading the opposition to the Mahathir government. Minister Anwar explains what Aliran is and how his encounters with members of Aliran have been.

"Aliran is an elite group, representing a few intellectuals who think they have the answer to all the problems. I consider this as intellectual arrogance, intellectual feudalism of a sort, one which does not tolerate any differences of views. I had an unpleasant exchange with my friend in Aliran. I said: 'Of course we can listen to you, but don't assume that you have all the answers, that we must be subjected to your views, your suggestions, your solutions. We have the right to differ because you have been proven wrong sometimes,' and they became very, very angry. I see no semblance of democracy or of tolerance. But they have been promoted because they actually voice certain sentiments that coincidentally or otherwise meet the sentiments of many groups outside the country.

"We take certain steps to ensure that our people are being protected and have the opportunity to develop, and some intellectuals are naturally cynical about this. They represent a group of 50-60 people who want the freedom to do whatever they like. But we have racial sentiments, religious problems that we have to deal with. People can talk about their liberty. People can talk, incite racial hatred. It is very democratic—

fair enough—and it should be very free, but should we pay the price and therefore block economic advancement of the country? Should we pay the price just because one group of zealots or fanatics wants to carry out their strategy the way they deem fit? I would say we can listen to them, allow them to speak, but we will not tolerate them—we have to draw the line—if it means destabilizing [the country]. Whatever we gained and shared so far will be destroyed. Once we have a situation like Sri Lanka or Burma, what option do you have?”

Aliran complains there is not enough social justice in Malaysia. Speaking as a cabinet member, Minister Anwar explained that the government’s concern was how to distribute wealth in a five-year program. “There will not be equity without growth. To promote equity, we are promoting growth. They have no concern for growth; they only talk of equity. Given a country like Malaysia where you happen to have more Chinese businessmen and therefore richer, and you have the indigenous population poorer, redistribution means taking from the rich Chinese to give to the poor Malays. Racially this is not acceptable. Therefore, it has to be for growth, to allow for more Chinese and some Malays to become rich, and then to have a program of progressive taxation to redistribute part of the wealth. To [Aliran], this is not acceptable. Anything that the government does—if they are not careful—would be seen to subject a particular racial group to discrimination. . . . To my horror, this [Aliran’s argument] appeals to some foreign journalists.”

‘We’re serious about democratizing education’

Minister Anwar’s passion has always been education and youth. In the early years following independence, Anwar and Dr. Mahathir were on the same side opposing then-Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and in pushing for Malay rights in education and economy. In 1971, Anwar helped found the private Yayasan Anda Akademik, a school that gave problem children and dropouts a second chance. Moderate fees were charged to enable children from poor families to attend the school, and scholarships were given to the needy. The Yayasan Anda Akademik grew from a student body of 80 to 1,200 today at Kampung Baru. Anwar himself served as the principal of the school until his appointment as deputy minister in the prime minister’s department. More than 100 students from Yayasan Anda Akademik have graduated from the University of Malaya, while several have gone for higher studies in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Minister Anwar emphasized to *EIR* that “Malaysia has spent a lot on education. It is a fact that we are serious in terms of democratization for education, access to higher education, access to quality education. We should take pride in being one of the few developing countries to have this sort of democracy in education—which to my mind is very important.” He proudly pointed out that 50% of students attending universities are women; in the early years following independence, women made up only some 10% of the university

student body. Minister Anwar has just promoted two women—for the first time—to head the Educational Research and Planning Division and the Teacher Training Division.

Although Minister Anwar firmly believes in relying on the Islamic faith to develop political and national consciousness of Muslims in Malaysia (51%), he is by no means an advocate of religious fanaticism or extremism. He has often emphasized the need for Islam to be flexible and tolerant. For him, Islam is a way of life, not a religion of rituals. Always bearing in mind that Malaysia is multi-racial, he has never advocated an Islamic state or an Islamic order for Malaysia. Admitting that there are religious aberrations, problems, and sometimes fanatical religious demands, he tries to set Islam in a positive light.

“For instance, what do I promote in Malaysian education? I promote Islam in relation to knowledge, Islam in relation to the understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, Islam in terms of science and technology. We get the geographers to talk about Islam so that Islam is not viewed narrowly. . . . Islam must be seen in the context of a multi-racial, multi-religious society. In most of our programs, we do encourage non-Muslims to participate so that there is no apprehension nor antagonism among the various racial and religious groups. What the government is trying to do is, while people do keep their faith and moral values, while Muslims are given the opportunity to preserve their cultural heritage and understanding, what we project is also the positive traits, so people see Islam in relation to the scientific, to knowledge, and not use Islam to develop anti-West hysteria.

“Of course, they say why should we be obsessed with the West? I say, fair enough, as you don’t want to have an obsession with the West, you should also not be hysterical against the West. You should select what you want, what you need, and reject what is irrelevant. This can only be done through complete comprehension of the knowledge, of Western society, of secularism or other values, you can’t reject what you don’t know. That is why I think in the last two years, we have less of this problem. We have had hardly any serious problem [of religious fanaticism]. I am not saying that we do not have these problems from time to time, but I would consider these as mere aberrations from certain pockets, and we deal with them.

“If these aberrations go beyond rules and procedures and become somewhat violent in nature or prone to violence like the incidents over the issue of the segregation of Hindu temples, then we do not tolerate it. We take up a very strong tough position. They either get arrested or we deal with them differently. We draw the line very clearly, and I think they probably have got the message. You can talk about Islam, your own values, you can talk about the faith. We encourage intellectual discourse, but we have to draw the line. It must be nonviolent. We will not tolerate this isolationist tendency of people who may have the propensity for or be prone to violence. Even that is not tolerated.”