

## Book Review

***The Asian Renaissance*, by Anwar Ibrahim. Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1996. Pp. 159. ISBN 981-204-785-9**

*Reviewer:* Omar Altalib, Sociology Department, University of Chicago.

The book under review is based on the experiences of the author, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, who is a product of the Muslim youth movement. His Muslim upbringing, the customs of his Malaysian village, his wide-ranging reading of Asian literature, the Books of Mencius, the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar, the ABIM youth movement, and the Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, have all helped shape his thoughts. The focus of the book is on the "East Asian Economic Miracle." It contains nine chapters (seven of which are based on speeches and papers of the author on various occasions between 1994 and 1996), an introduction, a bibliography, and an index.

Anwar Ibrahim has produced an easily readable work that provides social, economic, and political insights regarding an important part of the world. Its strength lies in its simple yet powerful message: East Asia has learned a great deal from the West, but it will destroy itself if it blindly imitates the United States and Europe. The strength of Asia lies in the values of hard work, humility, and respect for the wisdom of the elders. The decline of these values will no doubt weaken Asia considerably. No matter how technologically advanced East Asia becomes, the author cautions, a valueless Asia is a dying Asia. The author states that, "Asia needs to undergo a paradigm shift, as it seeks to respond to the utilitarian demands of the future without forsaking its identity," a challenge which requires a revitalization of Asia's traditions" (p. 131).

The arguments are clear and well-presented but some of his readers may disagree with some of the positions he has taken. His claim that "no other religion has put more confidence in the market than Islam" (p. 80), or that a "... unique institution of Muslim society is the *waqf*,

a charitable foundation which finances the growth of hospitals, universities, and scholarly pursuits" (p. 81), will certainly be contested. Many economists and political scientists may also take issue with his assertion that "...tax reduction can lead to an increase in the amount of revenue collected" (p. 88). The author, however, correctly points out that this idea was presented in the 1500s by the great scholar Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun.

Socially, the author draws on the work of a Malay intellectual, Syed Hussein Alatas, to make the point that "corruption, legalized or not, is a moral issue...but effective measures against corruption must go beyond mere moralizing, to encompass comprehensive legal and social reform" (p. 91). He also makes some insightful remarks in support of the efforts to strengthen civil society in the developing world. He, however, makes it clear that a secular/atheist civil society is not the best choice, "The civil society we envisage," he argues, "is one based on moral principles...the Asian vision of civil society departs in a fundamental respect ... from the social philosophy of the Enlightenment ... that religion and civil society are intrinsically incompatible ... Religion has been a source of great strength to Asian society and will continue to be a bulwark against moral and social decay" (p. 51). Civil society, in the author's view, is fundamentally based on the rights of life, property, and liberty, as articulated by Prophet Muhammad (SAS) in 700 CE. (p. 52). He however, makes a case, "not for mere tolerance, but rather for the active nurturing of alternative views. This would necessarily include lending a receptive ear to the voices of the politically oppressed, the socially marginalized, and the economically disadvantaged. Ultimately, the legitimacy of a leadership rests as much on moral uprightness as it does on popular support"(p. 58).

Politically, the author comes out clearly against overzealous nationalism. He agrees with the distinguished scholar Ali Mazrui that the narrowness of tribalism must be exposed, rather than espoused (p. 94). In this respect, he believes that, "in Malaysia, the best course for the indigenous people is to accelerate integration into modern society" (p. 103). This is based on the assumption that "one can be wholly integrated into the national mainstream, yet remain fully possessed of one's cultural specificity" (p. 104). A great deal of social scientific research claims that this assumption is problematic, and the author does not go into the arguments in detail. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to examine this assumption more closely. It may indeed be the case that

this is true for Malaysia only. In such a case, the distinct case of Malaysia needs to be fully explained.

Perhaps the book would have been even more valuable had the author presented a more detailed discussion of how to practically realize the prescriptions he has made for a saner world order. For instance, the author's prescription for "...the rejection of cultural jingoism, and taking cognizance of the rich diversity of religions and traditions of mankind..." (p. 23) is well worth pursuing. Similarly, his assertion that "it is imperative that efforts to create a competitively efficient and modern economy be supported and enhanced by ethical business practices..." (p. 27) is worth following. Likewise, his advise that "rather than thriving on sensationalism, acrimony, mud-slinging and stirring up animosities, the press in Asia should seek to harness societal energies towards the realization of cherished ideals: Justice, Virtue, and Compassion" (p. 57), or that "judges ought to exercise their judicial powers in accordance with the rule of law, and not the rule of men" (p. 64), are very sound. The author could have suggested the ways as to how developing societies may realistically achieve all of the above. It must however, be noted that the advanced industrial countries have indeed failed in this regard, some more than others.

On the whole, the book does an excellent job of description and prescription. Perhaps the author can be persuaded to write the sequel to this book, which may show the world how Malaysia has succeeded (and sometimes failed) to follow the prescriptions that the author has called for.

***Even Angels Ask: A Journey to Islam in America*, by Jeffery Lang. Beltsville, Maryland, USA: Amana Publications, 1997. Pp. 230. ISBN 0-915957-67-1.**

*Reviewer:* Amber Haque, Department of Psychology, IIUM.

The author, an American associate professor of mathematics, who converted to Islam in the early 1980's relives his past of becoming a Muslim in this very well written book. It is easy to read and interesting at the same time. The reader is sure to be impressed by the sheer honesty, openness, and reasoning which the author offers for accepting Islam and advocating others to do the same, throughout the book. He challenges the traditional Muslim practice of accepting Islam passively and thus named the book, "Even Angels Ask" based on the Qur'anic