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Review Essay

ANWAR IBRAHIM'S *THE ASIAN RENAISSANCE* REVISITED

*Osman Bakar*¹ and *Ayana Jihye Moon*²

Nearly three decades ago (1996), the first edition of this book was published by Times Books International. Its author, Anwar Ibrahim, was then one of the most powerful men in Asia. He was the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia (1993-1998) and its Minister of Finance (1991-1998), a post which he currently holds for the second time (since 3 December 2022). He is Malaysia's tenth and present Prime Minister (since 24 November 2022). The book received critical acclaim. It was reprinted in 1997. A new edition was published in 2008 by Marshall Cavendish.

Although almost three decades have passed since the publication of the first edition, most of the ideas contained in the book are even older. This is because the ideas are “the product of personal reflection on events, writings and encounters with personalities” (p. 15) that dated back to earlier times well before he climbed the political ladder to the corridors of power in Malaysia. However, the ideas in question remain to be still as fresh as when they were first presented in the book. The freshness of these ideas may be explained by the fact that they are big ideas, epistemologically speaking, dealing with issues of a “civilizational nature” confronting human societies and the global human order. By civilizational nature, we mean issues that are inclusive of every societal dimension and that are interconnected across cultures and

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civilizations. The freshness of the book's content also has to do with the fact that many of the issues discussed demonstrate continuity with the contemporary global political condition. That this book deals precisely with such kinds of big ideas is made clear by the titles of the book's nine chapters.

The title is *The Asian Renaissance*, and the chapters are as follows: 'Symbiosis Between East and West'; 'Democracy and Civil Society'; 'Justice and the Law'; 'Ethics and Economics'; 'The Humane Economy'; 'The Primacy of Culture'; 'Islam in Southeast Asia'; and 'The Asia of the Future'. Quite clearly, the ideas embodied in the chapters, when viewed together, constitute the best collection of major civilizational themes that any author has ever assembled and discussed in a single volume. The main concern of the book is with the contentious issue of the "Asian Renaissance" and the "Asia of the Future", hence the author's choice of the book's title. But he has treated this issue – indeed all issues in the rest of the chapters – in the context of a global discourse without detaching himself from the Islamic intellectual and philosophical tradition from which he hailed. His familiarity with the modern and contemporary world literature on the major civilizational issues he treated is admirable! This is the great merit of the book and its author.

I am glad to note here that I was among the earliest respondents to the book. In 1997, a year after its publication, the University of Malaya Press published my book titled *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue: The Quest for a Truly Universal Civilization*. Two chapters of the book make many references to Anwar's thoughts and his idea of *The Asian Renaissance*. One chapter (chapter 5) is titled "Asian Values, Or Universal Values Championed by Asia? Implications for East-West Understanding." The other chapter (chapter 6) is titled "The Relevance of Muhammad Iqbal's Idea of Islamic Renaissance to Contemporary Debate on the Asian Renaissance". My response to Anwar's book was not in the ordinary format of a full book review. Rather, the two chapters were meant to show my appreciation of the book as a literary work of rare quality in contemporary thought in terms of the depth of political wisdom it succeeds in displaying and to impress upon readers that Anwar Ibrahim, who is also a close friend of mine, is perhaps Asia's

best living political leader to have articulated a cogent philosophy on Asian Renaissance and the future of Asia.

As Anwar himself made clear in his book, his thoughts on the Asian Renaissance were inspired by many leading Asian and European thinkers whose views he approvingly quoted. But he is a thinker in his own right. He has the admirable ability to synthesize big ideas from diverse sources to help him come up with his own philosophical position. Anwar impressed me as an intellectual and political leader who commands a distinctive position in the Asian Renaissance. In my essay on Iqbal and the Asian Renaissance, I wanted to show that he was one of the major Asian thinkers who had a great influence on Anwar's vision of twenty-first-century Asia. But he goes beyond Iqbal. Iqbal is not known to have made any explicit reference to an Asian Renaissance, whether as a contemporary fact or as a future possibility.³ His primary preoccupation was with the renaissance of Islam and not the Asian Renaissance. Thus, Iqbal spoke of "Muslim Asia", "the younger generation of Islam in Asia", and "the reawakening of Islam". The closest he got to the idea of Asian Renaissance was when he used the term "new spirit in Asia". Anwar embraced, in principle, Iqbal's idea of a renaissance in Muslim Asia but extended it to the whole Asian continent. Anwar knows too well that Asia is a heterogeneous continent that is deeply divided along religious and cultural lines and thus, as well, the problematic nature of the intellectual task to articulate a rational discourse on renaissance for the whole continent. And yet he attempted to undertake the task. To a certain extent, Anwar succeeded in taking the discourse on Asia's future during the last decade of the twentieth century to a new level of clarity and sophistication.

No one before Anwar attempted to define the Asian Renaissance. He did. He defines it as "the revival of the arts and sciences under the influence of classical models based on strong moral and religious foundations; a cultural resurgence dominated by a reflowering of art and literature, architecture and music and advancements in science and technology" (p. 17-18). He tried to

³ Osman Bakar, *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue: The Quest for a Truly Universal Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1997), 60.

clarify on the definition by emphasizing that, notwithstanding their many similarities, the Asian Renaissance differs from the European “in that it has its foundations in religion and traditions” (p. 18). He further explains that the renaissance of Asia “entails the growth, developing and flowering of Asian societies...imbued with truth and the love of learning, justice and compassion, mutual respect and forbearance, and freedom with responsibility” (p. 19). When Anwar wrote these words in the 1990s explaining his vision of Asian Renaissance, he did not mean that this was a still far off possibility. He maintained instead that “the fresh blossoms of the Asian Renaissance” have begun to appear. Rather significantly, he was referring to the economic rise of Asia as a dimension of the Asian Renaissance, meaning that its fresh blossoms first appeared in the economic domain. He says, “Nothing is more visible in the rise of Asia than the economic aspect”. Anwar was thus arguing how central the role of economic power was to the materialization of the Asian Renaissance.

Anwar’s *The Asian Renaissance* raises questions about the necessary conditions for civilizational rebirth or renaissance. While acknowledging the importance of the economic dimension and transformation as a condition for a renaissance, as when he was alluding in the book to the rise of Asia three decades ago, Anwar views intellectual progress as a more fundamental determining factor that would result in a more inclusive and comprehensive, and thus a more progressive worldview. His views have not changed since then till now. Implied in the fundamental change in worldview is a major change in the way of thinking. As an example, the European Renaissance emerged following the collapse of the medieval Christian worldview when there was an unprecedented search in the West for new values to replace it. In this context, it is interesting to know which new worldview Anwar has in mind as the preferred one to be embraced by Asia if its Renaissance were to be realized in our times. It seems to us that in the book, Anwar sees in Islam and Confucianism a sharing of common philosophical ideas and intellectual perspectives on humanism, enlightenment, and social cohesion that would be instrumental to the materialization of the Asian Renaissance. Anwar argues for an Asian Renaissance that is

founded on religion and morality. As such, he is sympathetic to Confucian thought that places a strong emphasis on hierarchy, order, and the values of the state and family, even if its pursuit is viewed in the West as being at the expense of personal freedom. Moreover, in these civilizational features he sees similarities to the spirit of Islam and its ummatic characteristics.

When the Enlightenment prevailed in the West, Islam and Confucianism dominated Eastern thought, though they had something in common with ideas that were created and developed in other regions of the Orient. Many Eastern societies could not avoid the global impact of the Western Enlightenment Movement mainly through European colonization. Western Enlightenment principles such as democracy and individual rights were frequently imposed on nations that were under colonial rule in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. However, during and after the Enlightenment, Confucianism continued to exercise a powerful intellectual influence in East Asia, particularly China. Enlightenment concepts were frequently combined with regional customs, resulting in hybrid intellectual movements. Anwar bemoans the decline of Eastern community values in the face of the increasingly wealthy and powerful Western culture and influence. In the process of expressing that regret, he forcefully argues that Asia needs to break away from the Western-centered worldview. In contrast to the West, which had experienced a single, coherent Enlightenment movement, the East had seen fragmentations, with intellectual advancements taking place in different forms and at varying rates.

After World War II in 1945 and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, most colonized countries ostensibly achieved independence. However, the global security landscape centered on the United States and Europe, and the subsequent polarization of global security with the introduction of the US-China bipolar system made more Asian countries militarily and ideologically subordinate to the great powers in line with their national interests. Anwar seeks to challenge the notion that the West is the epitome of human progress in all spheres, including politics, economics, and culture. In this sense, the Asian Renaissance offers a glimpse of this perspective. Even when he was appointed Prime Minister of Malaysia, his global perspective

remained unchanged. He argues that Asia, with its many cultures and lengthy history, is more than capable of standing on its own two feet in the modern world and criticizes the Western-centric mindset that frequently rules international discourse. However, this critique does not imply that Anwar is a leader who rashly opposes Western ideologies.

Anwar is a great believer in inclusive and responsive leadership that can interact with the public and permit real participation of the citizens, and he supports strong leadership. He frequently criticizes authoritarian governments wherever these may be and highlights the value of accountability, civil society, and pluralism. In criticizing authoritarian post-colonial non-Western governments in his chapter “Justice and the Law,” Anwar quoted George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: “It would be a tragedy indeed if this hard-earned freedom were to result merely in the substitution of a foreign oppressor with a domestic one” (p. 62). In contrast to both Western liberal democracy and dictatorial models, his conception of democracy in Asia combines political openness with economic progress. Furthermore, Anwar’s worldview includes the notion of solidarity and regional cooperation. In his capacity as Malaysia’s political leader, he advocates for increased cooperation among Asian countries, especially within ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), in furtherance of regional economic integration, peace, and security. With the view of increasing Malaysia’s global influence and creating its new security belt against Western dominance, Anwar’s MADANI government brings Malaysia into the fold of BRICS.

Anwar Ibrahim is a devoted Muslim leader who reminds us of fading Islamic values through *The Asian Renaissance*. He emphasized the solidarity of the Muslim ummah by speaking out without hesitation on behalf of the Muslims and the ummah of Palestine who face unfair treatment and genocide in the lopsided international political landscape. As he wrote in the book, he personally demonstrates his political solidarity with Palestine by fostering unity and exchanges with Asian nations like Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and the Gulf states. Anwar’s emphasis on unity stems from his conviction that, rather than being divided by historical

divides and differences, Asia's strength resides in its capacity to cooperate and put up a united front in international affairs.

The big difference between Anwar Ibrahim and other Malaysian leaders is that he is an intellectual, a philosopher, and an activist who loves learning. Anwar presents an Asian renaissance discourse that posits its realization through an emphasis on knowledge and learning and proposes. He believes that it would be possible for Islam to play a central role in shaping the future course of Asian values. To develop a more inventive and globally competitive workforce, he advocates for rejuvenating Asian intellectual traditions by fusing them with modern knowledge. Anwar thinks that Asia needs to invest in its human capital and that educational reform is crucial to its long-term prosperity. The world's political and economic landscape has brought a sense of loss to Asian countries for a long time. Furthermore, while having many positive aspects, Asian nations have been able to absorb Western influence due to the West's supremacy in culture and intellect.

Likewise, Islam in modern times has lost much of its importance in the global world, even though it contains many aspects that make it a distinguished civilization beyond religion in the narrow sense as understood by many people. According to Anwar Ibrahim, civilization is more than just political or economic dominance. His approach strongly emphasizes the value of recovering Asia's cultural legacy while interacting with the outside world in a fair, inclusive, and sustainable manner. In this sense, Anwar's conception of civilization is not merely a criticism of Western models; rather, it is an appeal for a more comprehensive, integrated picture of humanity, one in which many customs and cultures can live and work together to create a common future. Even after taking office as Malaysia's Prime Minister, his long-standing philosophy is clearly in place. As highly noticeable, he uses the word "civilization" often. In addition, in pursuit of civilizational renewal (*tajdīd al-haḍāri*) upon becoming the 10th Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar launched his Malaysia MADANI (Civilizational Malaysia) policy, which is presented as a new national vision, social philosophy, and a comprehensive framework for the formation of national policies.

The renaissance that Anwar has long advocated is one in

which Asian nations would enlighten themselves, safeguard their identities, and expand their influence in the world based on their achievements. In so doing, rather than succumbing to a global order based on a unipolar or multipolar world, more Asian countries would act as one solid force to influence the world's political, economic, and social landscapes. This appears to be the reason why as a politician and intellectual activist he has attempted to champion his civilizational ideals especially through his exercise of moral leadership, interfaith and intercultural dialogue, and regional cooperation. He seems to be hoping for the day when Asia will change the world order by fully protecting its Asian identity and what is Asian.

The chapters of Anwar's books clearly show that he is keen and energetic in engaging not only fellow Asian political leaders and intellectuals but also the contemporary West in a discourse on the meaning and civilizational significance of renaissance for Asia. The issues he has selected for this intellectual engagement are of central importance to modern Western thought and civilization. Thus, discussing these issues would provide him with the golden opportunity to impress upon his counterparts in the contemporary West that they are not marginal to Asian values as some in the West would like to think. On the contrary, issues such as democracy and civil society, justice and the law, ethics and economics, and the primacy of culture are viewed by him as fundamental to the Asian civilizational consciousness as well. However, to be sure, there are differences in foundation, approach, and emphasis between the modern Western and Asian civilizational consciousness. As he puts it, "while the objectives may coincide with those of others, Asia differs in emphases and approaches". Anwar further argues that "although it is open to learn from others, it is nevertheless justifiably convinced of the efficacy of its ways because Asian cultures have survived largely intact for millenniums" (p. 100).

The words quoted above from the book's chapter "The Primacy of Culture" demonstrate Anwar as the "Asian Man" who speaks on behalf of Asia viewed as a single geo-cultural entity in the context of its encounter with the West. But Anwar is deeply conscious of the multicivilizational character of Asia. He is well-

informed not only about civilizational differences between Asia and the West but also about such differences within Asia itself, which poses a great challenge to the renaissance of Asia as a common quest. He is not shy to talk and even argues about the differences between civilizations. He is a great believer in dialogue as a cultural virtue. The spirit of dialogue permeates the whole of the *Asian Renaissance*. It is as if he is telling readers that dialogue is the key to settling differences. With enlightened dialogue between cultures and civilizations, there are no differences that cannot be addressed. In this sense, Anwar is an optimist advocate of dialogue. His optimism largely stems from his life-long dedication to intercultural dialogue dating back to the days when he was a youth leader in culturally pluralistic Malaysia. He built his reputation as a successful international advocate of intercultural dialogue at various stages of his life. More recently, Anwar speaks of the need for the contemporary world to strive for the cause of the dialogical community. In embracing the idea of dialogical community, he took inspiration from the first Confucian society in China and the first Muslim community in Arabia, respectively founded as exemplary dialogical communities by Confucius and the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). As Malaysia's present Prime Minister, Anwar now has the chance to further develop and advance the idea of dialogical community that would help him renew his quest for an Asian Renaissance after having been deprived of more than two decades of the prime of his life in the pursuit of one of his great dreams due to political trials and tribulations.

Anwar's *The Asian Renaissance* is an inspiring book with precious messages for our times that deserves to be read, especially by Asia's younger generation. It is as relevant today as it was three decades ago. It is even more relevant today when the rise of Asia, especially as an economic power is becoming increasingly visible globally. It is therefore not surprising that China and South Korea are interested in translating Anwar's *The Asian Renaissance* into their respective languages. Xiamen University China is to be congratulated for its laudable initiative in undertaking the translation of the original English edition of this book into Mandarin. Thanks to this translation, millions of Chinese-speaking readers, especially in

China, can now benefit from this cogent discourse by a leading Asian intellectual and political leader on issues pertaining to the future of their respective countries and the common destiny of their continent. A Korean translation of the book is now under discussion. A new second edition of Anwar's *The Asian Renaissance* would also be greatly welcomed by many people around the globe!

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