

DOI: 10.1355/sj29-3m

*The Evolution of a Muslim Democrat: The Life of Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim.* By Charles Allers. New York: Peter Lang, 2013. 345 pp.

Any attempt at offering a biography of Malaysia's enigmatic politician Anwar Ibrahim (b. 1947) will be intriguing for many reasons. Perhaps more than any other political figure in contemporary Malaysia, Anwar has led a life whose vicissitudes have seen him oscillating from high points — popular student firebrand, social activist–intellectual, rising star of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), handpicked protégé of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad (b. 1925), minister and deputy prime minister, right down to the lowest points that one can imagine — twice an Internal Security Act (ISA) detainee, convict stripped of human dignity, constantly excoriated opposition leader and purported hypocrite accused of heinous sexual crimes unbecoming of a professed Muslim holding leadership aspirations in religiously conservative Malaysia. Harnessing information from variegated sources, including personal interviews and published analyses of Malaysian politics and of Anwar Ibrahim's diverse roles in it, *The Evolution of a Muslim Democrat* should be commended for ably capturing the different and even contrasting nuances of Anwar's political life.

Far from being a blatantly flattering portrayal of Anwar Ibrahim as a consummate political leader once touted to be Malaysia's "Prime Minister in waiting", Allers' account does not refrain from detailing episodes of Anwar's political career that have exposed him to allegations of inconsistency, opportunism and unprincipled politicking. One example is Anwar's alleged compromise on money politics during his days of ascendancy in UMNO, culminating in the victory of his *Wawasan* (Vision) Team — of which present Prime Minister Najib Razak and Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin were members — in the fractious party elections of 1993. While employing analyses proffered by scholars critical of Anwar's having indulged in patronage politics such as K.S. Jomo, Edmund Terence Gomez and Kikue Hamayotsu, Allers balances his account by citing

the analyses of Peter Riddell, Meredith Weiss and Khoo Boo Teik, among others, all of whom are inclined to offer mitigating factors in explaining Anwar's antics in exculpatory terms.

Another instance of vacillation in Anwar Ibrahim's political posture that Allers chronicles is his position on the draconian ISA, which had authorized detention without trial since its inauguration in 1960. Quoted in 1992 having defended the selective retention of the Act, Anwar remained mute for the large part of Prime Minister Mahathir's recurrent instances of recourse to the oppressive legislation. These instances resulted in gross violations of human rights, as during the Operation Lallang round-up against civil rights campaigners in 1987 and the government's clampdown on the Darul Arqam *dakwah* (missionary) movement in 1994. Only when out of power, and after undergoing the traumatic experience of both preventive and judicial incarceration from the time of his post-sacking arrest in 1998 until 2004, did Anwar unwaveringly oppose the ISA. For the record, Prime Minister Najib Razak eventually announced the repeal of the ISA in September 2011, but replaced it the following year with the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act of 2012.

Just prior to Operation Lallang, Anwar — in his capacity as minister of education and with the backing of the chauvinistic UMNO Youth then led by Najib Razak — also clashed with proponents of Chinese-medium education who resented what they regarded as Anwar's unwarranted intrusion into their affairs. Such dabbling in ethnocentric politics, which diehard Anwar supporters would rationalize as a means of winning over the grass-roots Malay-Muslim support necessary for political advancement in UMNO, remains a black spot in his career. That career has featured an otherwise inclusive appeal to harmonious ethno-religious relations in the manner of *convivencia* in medieval Spain. The question of Anwar's mixed history of yielding to pragmatic politics aside, Allers gives prominence to pluralism as a major aspect of Anwar's religio-political thought that has gained credence globally, especially since his heavy-handed treatment by Malaysia's ruling establishment after 1998. Amidst the trials and tribulations that have befallen Anwar as a political

practitioner, Allers argues that his numerous writings and speeches reflect fundamental consistency, rooted in his firm belief in not only the compatibility of but also the convergence between Islamic and universal principles such as freedom, justice and democracy. Anwar has been critical of Muslim leaders who have denied their citizens the rights due to them as human beings. Such criticisms have not, however, stopped Anwar from being honoured by his co-religionists with frequent accolades and speaking invitations from the Muslim commonwealth, not least from Turkey and Indonesia — the two countries to which he has most often referred as model Muslim democracies.

On the whole, Allers' book is a sympathetic rendering of Anwar's professional life, but it falls short of being unduly laudatory. Notwithstanding contradictions pertaining to his political praxis and the continually scurrilous attacks upon Anwar's reputation engineered by Malaysia's state-controlled mainstream media, the fact that an American-based pastor could take the trouble to conduct both primary and secondary research in producing *The Evolution of a Muslim Democrat* speaks volumes about Anwar's untainted image in the eyes of admirers worldwide. Upon reading Allers' book, one may wonder if Anwar would not have fared better as a globe-trotting international statesman preaching the virtues of democracy in an increasingly plural world. He was, after all, once considered for the post of secretary-general of the United Nations — a fitting position from which to articulate a vision that has resonated across borders on matters such as “transcending tolerance” and *masyarakat madani* (civil society).

Anwar Ibrahim has, however, been at the end of the day, a true Malaysian and Malay-Muslim at heart. Sacrificing the comforts of possible retirement amidst global adulation, he has remained first and foremost concerned with reform in Malaysia. On the basis of his capricious record, sceptics might nonetheless see in him a power-hungry individual intent on avenging the injustices done unto him, his family and his loyalists. His detractors, meanwhile, will be perennially scheming to prevent his rise to the apex of national leadership. This is evident in the recent Court of Appeal ruling

dismissing his previous High Court acquittal on fresh allegations of sodomy. This unexpected verdict rendered meaningless a by-election dubbed the “Kajang Move” and designed to install Anwar as chief minister of Selangor, purportedly as a launching pad to the prime ministership.

Whatever the outcome of his judicial troubles, Anwar’s place in Malaysian history is assured. While Anwar’s practical contribution remains constricted, his post-*Reformasi* discourse and programmes offered to Malaysians a viable alternative to the condescending, hegemonic and racist politics to which they have been subjected by the UMNO-led political establishment since independence. Putting aside technical weaknesses such as the frequent presence of too many quotations from authors of divergent viewpoints in single sentences, *The Evolution of a Muslim Democrat* manages to capture Anwar’s undying vision of a better deal for Malaysia, Malaysians and Malay-Muslims. Allers contextually locates the heritage of that vision in Malaysian Islam’s legacy of sufi-centric religious tolerance and Anwar’s own socio-religious upbringing at home and school, particularly at the English-orientated secondary institution, the Malay College of Kuala Kangsar. Whether Anwar’s lofty ideals see the light of day during his lifetime is left for Malaysians to decide in forthcoming polls.

**Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid**

School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia; email: [afauzi@usm.my](mailto:afauzi@usm.my).

DOI: 10.1355/sj29-3n

*Adat and Indigeneity in Indonesia: Culture and Entitlements between Heteronomy and Self-Ascription*. Edited by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2013. 240 pp.

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin has contributed to academic debates about indigenous Balinese traditions and rituals for the last two decades. Her latest edited volume targets a wider readership than fellow