

ANWAR IBRAHIM

# Rethinking Ourselves

*Justice, Reform and Ignorance in  
Postnormal Times*

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## PROLOGUE

### EYE OF THE STORM

Change is, more often than not, a tropical cyclone. And in the waning days of the twentieth century, we knew that we were not only at the mercy of one of history's greatest cyclones of change, but perhaps the first convergence of multiple simultaneous mega-events. The post-Cold War world triggered a realigning of geopolitics, technology was advancing communication, information, and efficiency by quantum leap, and the World Wide Web had arrived heralding phenomenal change. Along came disruptive shifts towards globalisation, a neoliberal economic order, and the ebbing crises in energy and global warming. At the centre of the tropical cyclone is the eye of the storm, the calm and tranquil epicentre of the event. The winds and rains cease as clouds eagerly swirl around. In the latter half of 1998, the eye of this storm was firmly fixed on the country I call my home, Malaysia.

The sun went down on 20 September. Yet, the usual twilight cooling of temperatures did not follow. The tension between the people and the government was thick and a coup de grâce from the powers that be could come at any time. Beneath the surface, this day was the culmination of weeks of orchestrated campaigning that had built up a vile media blitz to assassinate my character. Surrounding the eye of the storm, the point of least inten-

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sity, is the eyewall, a ring of towering thunderstorms representing the most intense zone of the storm, where storms are most severe and the winds are at their highest. Eighteen days prior, on 2 September,<sup>1</sup> I was unceremoniously and summarily sacked from my posts as deputy prime minister and minister of finance. I was relegated as a political outcast to face the overbearing might of the state.

The storm began with an opportunity. In 1997, I assumed the office of acting prime minister. The reform I had long sought after could finally be implemented. Working with what was then called the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA), we looked into some glaring loopholes in the agency's existing structure. We even conducted a detailed study of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in Hong Kong as a point of comparison. One of the more glaring finds in all this research was that the ACA, as it stood then, would allow corrupt officials to be shielded from the law once they were no longer in office. To rectify this deficit and pave the way for the contemporary iteration of the ACA, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), an amendment was drafted. The amendment was first discussed in a cabinet meeting where my fellow ministers seemed to suggest that it was not the right time for such changes. If not now, when? So, I threw caution to the wind in spite of the exhortations and earnest advice from close colleagues of the repercussions of my actions. I pushed the amendment through parliament where it was voted into law. My actions were seen not just as a threat against the holders of power but as an audacious attack against the beneficiaries of the kleptocrats—families, cronies, and captains of industry. Soon after, the knives were out against me. The storm was in full gale.

The average eye of a tropical storm can be between twenty and forty miles wide, but the experience can last for around thirty hours. The eye I was in lasted for eighteen days. Prior to this rela-

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tive calm, the ferocious eyewall of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis gave its worst. On 2 July 1997, a heavy clap of thunder rolled across the financial markets of East Asia. The Bank of Thailand, having run out of international reserves, threw in the towel and floated its currency, the Thai baht (฿), in order to sustain its US dollar value. Unsurpassed since the Great Depression of 1929–39, this turmoil started to brew, eventually unleashing a raging tempest from Thailand, throughout Southeast Asia. It first went to the Philippines, then to Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, before taking off for the shores of other Asian countries. The chaos erupted with such rapidity and force that it also spread to Russia and Latin America and threatened to engulf the entire world with its pernicious impacts.

In the financial history of the world, no capitalist country has ever demonstrated immunity from one kind of financial crisis or another. It is the nature of the free market that sometimes overshooting takes place and the economy becomes susceptible to external shocks. But on the whole, governments that built strong institutions would command the confidence of the people. When a financial crisis breaks out, swift and decisive measures must be taken by responsible governments to stabilise the situation. Under these circumstances, the use of public funds may be the only means possible to turn the economy around. When I was finance minister in the 1990s, we called this the Keynesian doctrine of pump-priming, a device not entirely free from misuse or abuse. Depending on who was doing the pumping and who was on the receiving end, collecting the fruits of priming, such an undertaking can be open to gross malfeasance. When the issues of governance, transparency, and accountability are left neglected, even the tried and tested toolkit for economic woes could prove to be ineffective. Between the implementation of sound policy decisions and the realisation of a government's true objectives lies a deep and widening chasm. Between saving billions for the

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nation's coffers and rescuing friends and cronies, falls the shadow of shady decisions made by those in power. The voices of hawkers and rural farmers fall on deaf ears, drowned out by the pleas of the sons of cronies.

On reflection, this was a time of financial euphoria where Malaysia was among the Asian Tiger economies, hailed as the Asian Miracle. The World Bank published a special report entitled 'The East Asian Economic Miracle', which analysed the economic achievements of the region. While many Asian leaders basked in the glory of this accomplishment, I took it with cautious optimism. I was mindful that the success could be transient if we were not alert to the pitfalls that lingered, primarily related to issues of abuse of power and corruption. On one occasion, in my welcoming remarks to the World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn, I said that while we rejoiced at our success, we should not forget the plight of the poor and the marginalised. Further, I highlighted the imperative of good governance and accountability as a bastion against the temptation and risks of corruption and abuse of power. This would warrant the necessary checks and balances that could come about with proper commitment and legislation.

As a nation, Malaysia had managed to weather that crisis, but only just so. This financial crisis served as an ominous warning for global financial crises to come. The 1997 crisis also nearly snuffed out the 'Tiger Cub' economies of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Viet Nam in their cradle and threatened the endangered 'Rising Tiger' economies of South Korea, the Taiwan region, Hong Kong SAR, and Singapore. The recovery placed a shadow on the hopes for the dawn of what many were speculating would be the 'Asian Century'. And Malaysia had no time to rest if it did not want its then forty years of progress from colonial servitude to have been in vain.

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The calm of the eye collapsed along with the front door of my house—which was unlocked, by the way. It was kicked in by masked, armed men with automatic weapons. My sacking and defamation had been only the beginning. Now I was under arrest.

Hours that could well have been days later, I awoke in a cell on an infernal level of Bukit Aman, the Royal Malaysian Police Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. Months of stress and struggle, especially from the last few weeks before I was dramatically arrested at home, had caught up with me all at once. Awake, I was exhausted.

Only one thing was allowed to me in my more or less immobilised condition. I turned to the jailer and asked in which direction was the *qibla*, the direction towards Mecca in which Muslims pray. A small spigot in my cell granted me the ability to perform my *wudu* or ablutions, the sacred washing Muslims undergo prior to doing their five daily prayers. It was the most difficult *wudu* I have performed to date. As I stood in the direction of Mecca, the sacred city, I took a deep breath, clearing my mind, and I did the one thing still allowed to an incarcerated man. I prayed.

On the other side of the eye of the storm a great deal of change stood before all of us, beyond the then all-consuming fear of the Y2K virus.<sup>2</sup> While technological advancement was expected to go the only way available, few would have been able to anticipate the impacts of the digital transformation and revolution on our doorsteps. Indeed, even in 1999, a US presidential election had consequences for the rest of the world. But few could have foreseen the stakes of the showdown between George W. Bush and Al Gore, especially in light of the terrorist attacks and ‘war on terror’ that were to follow. Meanwhile, much of the world had not come to terms with the trauma of colonialism or properly critiqued the postcolonial experience. Justice was not as easily accessible a commodity as our post-war, human rights

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aware contemporary world might have suggested. I was engaging this fact at first hand. Democracy had been taken for granted and nefarious people were taking advantage. Islam, the world's second largest religion, was a matter of deep ignorance for many around the world and it was about to be thrust into the spotlight on the world's stage. But that light was to be of a most unfavourable hue to those of us who were Muslim. And prior ignorance continued to arc towards further ignorance, even towards hate, xenophobia, and especially Islamophobia. All the norms and ways of thinking we had taken as given were also evaporating and would need to be replaced by novel and innovative approaches to what was increasingly becoming a postnormal world.

The famous black eye I received in prison became a symbol of *Reformasi*—reform.<sup>3</sup> It was a new storm of long-overdue change for Malaysia. As storms in Malaysia and beyond gathered and raged outside the prison walls, personally I too faced protracted incarceration, but I could not allow it to eclipse the significance of the bigger picture: the struggle against the deep-rooted corruption and the abuse of office, between freedom and tyranny, in pursuance of justice, has punctuated the much longer story of my career. Its genesis lay in my scholarly pursuits which moulded my intellectual growth, initially focussed on the issues of poverty and societal welfare. This led to my first 'dalliance' with the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA)<sup>4</sup> following demonstrations way back in 1974.

Hence, while my infamous 1998 sacking and imprisonment are well known, the fact is that 1998 was not my first time in detention. At the centre of an earlier gathering storm was the abject poverty of rural farmers in Baling, in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah. It was a cause with mass appeal to college and university students of the 1970s, like us. Baling's economy was made or broken on the rubber industry. The year 1974 was not fortuitous as harsh weather conditions hit the rubber harvests,

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### PREPARING FOR THE NEXT STORM

To borrow roughly from the words of the American novelist E. L. Doctorow, where the historian tells us what happened in the past, the artist tells us how it felt.<sup>1</sup> To the outside world, he is not well known. But in Malaysia, Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh, better known by his stage name ‘P. Ramlee’, is an absolute legend. A creative with no formal training in the fields he mastered, P. Ramlee was an actor, musician, composer, singer, and filmmaker. He flourished between 1945 and 1973, the period when he made his most notable films and wrote and sang his most memorable songs. When we watch his films or listen to his songs, we feel Malaysia’s independence, *Merdeka*, in all its anxiety, hope, uncertainty, and excitement. Indeed, the appreciation of the man often derives from a romantic longing for a bygone era. While there is nothing wrong with art and the artist being held as a source of evocative sentimentality, to paint the portrait of P. Ramlee in nostalgia alone is to miss the subject—almost entirely. For he was a revolutionary. But not a revolutionary in the sense we might readily think of when reflecting on postcolonial heroes. He drew no blood with either sword, *keris*,<sup>2</sup> or even the words he penned; the most vehement thing he ever did was melt hearts with his dulcet voice and debonair charm. But

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with image and sound, he poked fun at and exposed the underlying vestigial feudalist tendencies that carried forward into Malaysian culture and, with clever subtlety, criticised the government and the ruling party UMNO, something not readily done at the time. And his stories championed the values we hold dear as Malaysians, such as social justice and equality. He was a revolutionary in the way that only the artist can be. He helped us engage with change.

What I value the most in P. Ramlee's films is that each story has a core thread of justice running through it. Beyond nostalgia, he captured those universal feelings that we carry through our histories, while also keeping that which we hold most dear, our culture, intact, tapping into and drawing out our most inherent values. Through the laughter and tears conjured, his films have no pontificating heroes but instead we are shown images of what justice looks like. The faults in our society are placed before our eyes. Unobtrusively, we learn where we may have strayed, be it in the social or cultural arenas or even in the realm of politics. And then we wake, to borrow from Kant, 'from our dogmatic slumber',<sup>3</sup> we find new cogitations stirring us. This is at the heart of rethinking ourselves. Taking this one step further, he not only critiques to denigrate; he synthesises.

In the 1958 film, *Sarjan Hassan (Sergeant Hassan)*, we see P. Ramlee at his pinnacle. The fictional story follows the story of a young orphan, suffering the indignation of his foster brothers, who rises up through the Malayan military as it fought against Japanese occupation.<sup>4</sup> Coming out only a year after Malaya's independence from Great Britain, but set during World War II, the film balances the nascent nation of Malaya between British and Japanese rule when we did not know who we were going to be or where we were going to stand between the rest of Asia and the West. But the true genius is in the music. The hit single from the film, 'Wait a Little While' (*Tunggu Sekejap*), blends

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Western motifs with those of other Asian films of the time while retaining a distinct Malayness—the lyrical play of Bahasa Melayu is masterful. If the song had appeared in a Bollywood or Hollywood film, people all over the world would be humming the tune. Such synthesis and integration of styles and motifs demonstrated the rich potential of the independence not just of Malaysia but all the newly independent Asian states.

Independence was a revolutionary change and a moment of great hope. New ideas were in no short supply, and no idea was considered to be mutually exclusive. Islam and modern music lived as cordial neighbours; Islam and democracy were seen as bedfellows. There was no need to look East or West. There was a real opportunity for a new way that went beyond colonialism or anything that fitted nicely into one categorical box or the other. There was a wonderful cosmopolitanism that today seems too good to be real, only the stuff of escapist cinema. Best of all, there was no fear. For what was distinctly Malaysian or Islamic, or Indian, or Asian, was not lost. P. Ramlee demonstrated the ability to play between East and West while also being Asian, Malay, Muslim, and Malaysian, and losing none of the vibrance of any of the parts or the whole in the process. It is a cultural narrative without the affection of scholastic disputation, but it is certainly meritorious and deserves a closer study considering that it was advanced decades earlier than the leading discourses of the day. Speaking of which, one cannot overlook *The Ethics of Identity*, where Kwame Appiah challenges essentialist, hard-and-fast notions of identity, positing them as static. Appiah instead notes that identity is in constant flux and subject to the extraordinary forces of time, including the dynamics of historical developments and language. Rejecting the notion that identities inevitably clash, he calls for dialogue among the world's diverse communities and ethnicities that would foster greater respect and understanding. He champions cosmopolitanism, where ethical consid-

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erations are the imperative of connectedness and inclusivity rather than division and isolation.<sup>5</sup>

It is hard to tell whether it was our reticence to change or our accumulated ignorance when faced with change that played a greater role in sidetracking us from crafting our preferred futures. Perhaps it was a combination of both. No doubt our own elites, who drank the Kool-Aid of 'Westernisation', played a major part in the situation that many former colonial states find themselves in; much like Sergeant Hassan's stepbrother who joins the Japanese secret service and then exploits his own people. Yet, the American futurist Alvin Toffler's definition of change as 'the process by which the future invades our lives'<sup>6</sup> is apt here. Without awareness, we appear to be under the constant siege of the future. Indeed, one might say we are being colonised by the future. But as we hone our awareness, we quickly see that that 'future' does not hold up. For it is not our future, but someone else's.

That future, rather, has been influenced and dictated by Western leaders who, ostensibly, preached liberalism, democracy, and the rule of law. However, from Iran to Egypt, Lebanon to Indonesia, Chile to Congo, they have systematically undermined all three. The US has openly accepted interference in elections and the toppling of democratically elected governments that it did not appreciate. Whenever it suits, Western nations support and promote military and authoritarian regimes. For the past fifty years, Western diplomacy has essentially been diplomacy by military might. Politics and economics writ large have come to be a process of perpetuating the present. Even though the theory does not hold, our actions dictate that history has ended and as long as we maintain the status quo, nobody has to get hurt. Yet, we do not realise we are negotiating while we have a gun held against our heads. The very notion of justice seems to have no value. Where so-called justice has been pursued, it has benefited

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only the privileged few. Even the much-lauded Rawlsian theory of justice as fairness, using the veil of ignorance, has no place for the poor, women, or other marginalised communities, nor much universal value. We are asked to look inward and forget about history and never mind the future. And we live life through that ignorant lens not realising, to borrow from the words of the American memoirist and poet Maya Angelou, that in our ignorance we imprison one another, and also ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

Being able to quickly adapt and respond to change has been the unwritten and incompletable daily work behind my career in politics that has framed most of my life. It took me far too long to consider the future and to look ahead at that beautiful, plural potentiality. Granted, I have always had dreams and desires, but these wishes were often tempered upon the stage of a perpetual present or cloaked in an unwaning fixation on the past. Reflection on the past is necessary, so that we might take wisdom from the lessons ignored or the road less travelled, but we must not let the past linger and limit our capacity to build a better tomorrow. And even with justice as my guide, to not consider what justice looks like in the future held my efforts back. I was trapped between a past that haunted me, both with the threat of subjugation and the false promise of romantic nostalgia, and a future that was unattainable.

The seeds of rethinking ourselves, so that our future could again be ours, were planted the day I was named Malaysia's minister of finance in 1991. While a minister of finance could be said to have done their job if they can balance the budget—a task by no means easy or straightforward—so much more was at stake with my appointment. First, financial failure would not only topple the government come election time, but could doom the whole nation to years of suffering. Second, having seen so many respectable and prominent individuals entering my office and suddenly reduced to begging panhandlers, this was my first chance to

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**Anwar Ibrahim**, Malaysia's Prime Minister, is a public intellectual and founder of the People's Justice Party. He endured a decade of imprisonment for his staunch anti-corruption and reformist politics. Formerly based at the University of Oxford, and Georgetown and Johns Hopkins Universities, he is the author of *The Asian Renaissance*.

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