

THE ANWAR FACTOR

FORMER DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER **DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM** INTRODUCED A NEW DYNAMIC TO THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE BY RETURNING TO PARLIAMENT THIS YEAR AS OPPOSITION LEADER. BUT HOW EFFECTIVE WILL HE BE SEATED ACROSS THE ESTABLISHMENT THAT HE ONCE WAS A PART OF? WORDS **EDDIN KHOO**

IT WASN'T SO MUCH A CASE OF HEADY

hubris as an unshakeable faith in that supposed constant of the Malaysian political temperament—"conventional wisdom"—which induced an almost delusional stupor among the governing Barisan Nasional coalition, defining its disposition and determining its attitude, prior to the announcement of the General Elections of March 2008.

By the previous year's end—2007—public life had witnessed the spectacle of tens of thousands taking to the streets in Kuala Lumpur in at least two separate, sizeable demonstrations, extensively covered by the world media but summarily denounced and demonised, in the usual vernacular, by the relevant authorities and political figureheads.

So that even as the events preceding March 8th unravelled, the general mood among the governing coalition was that "conventional wisdom" would eventually prevail, and that the voting collective, approaching polling day in 2008, would recognise they had, really, already witnessed this general election before—more specifically in 1999 when, following the cataclysm of demonstrations, public outrage and distaste at the sacking, beating,

incrimination and imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim, the governing coalition, give or take a state or two, was nevertheless returned with a secure two-thirds majority in parliament.

The strategy of the governing coalition then proved largely predictable—laud past successes, exploit the demographics and concentrate all assault on the figure—at this time still prohibited from contesting the national elections and serving in an informal capacity as de facto leader of a political party—of Anwar Ibrahim.

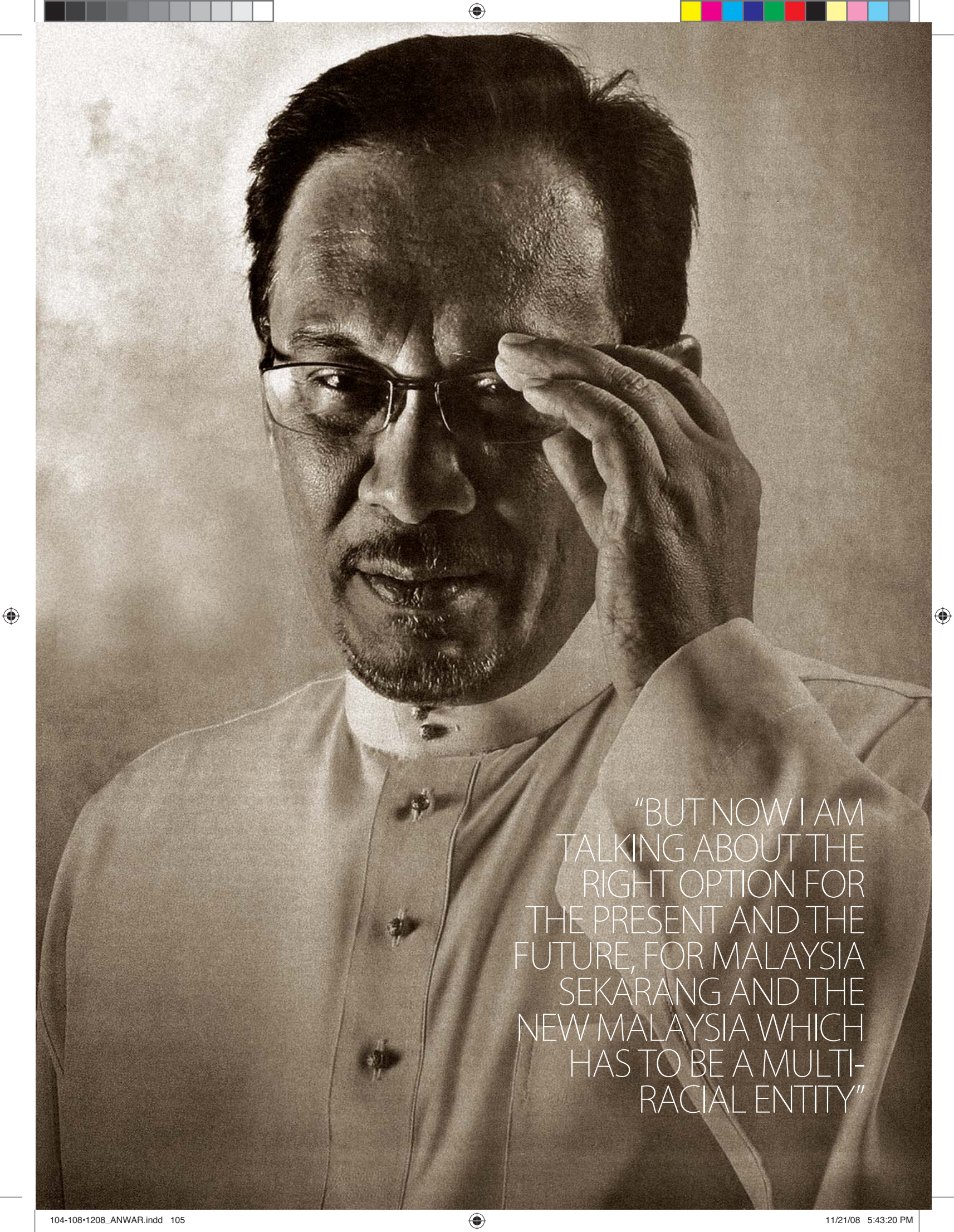
In American electoral parlance, the subsequent campaign would have been described as essentially "negative"—parry and stave off the issues at hand, lure detractors from the woodwork to denounce perceived inconsistencies in the nemesis, and direct personal attacks on character. There was, it was apparent, a prevailing sense of simply wishing Anwar Ibrahim away—a yearning that appeared to infect even the occupant of the highest political position in the land when, just days before polls, he remarked, "Who is Anwar Ibrahim? I have forgotten him."

It proved a strategy, in the words of the erstwhile President of Gerakan, Tun Lim Keng Yaik, one of the several figures rounded up to

comprise the coterie of hit Anwar honchos, that roundly "backfired".

Election result night commenced ordinarily enough as, but for a few surprises, seat after seat fell into the fold of the governing Barisan Nasional, ensuring a simple majority victory where it had, especially in recent times, frequently been won but rarely acknowledged—in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Events West of Borneo, however, proved considerably more tentative as ensuing results, throughout the peninsula, induced a stutter among 'live' news presenters of the national media and bafflement among 'experts' invited to offer standard 'analysis' of the day's results. By the early hours of the next morning, even the national media had begun to declare—in different measures of enthusiasm and fretting—an electoral "tsunami", following the loss of five principal states (and most constituencies in the Federal Territory) to the Opposition Pakatan Rakyat, marking a seismic shift in the popular vote and, most crucially, affirming the now indelible presence of Anwar Ibrahim at the centre of a radically transformed political landscape in Malaysia. In the cruellest



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of ironies, victor was cast as vanquished—a paradox captured in statement on one of the countless celebratory banners strung across the country which read “You forgot Anwar, now the nation has forgotten you”.

Riposte from the governing coalition was swift and not without credence. Prime Minister Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was quick to remind that a victory was still just that, a victory; that, in contemporary times, a two-thirds parliamentary was a luxury few governments could afford and emphasising that, indeed, the governing coalition were only a few seats away from obtaining that coveted mark. There was some credibility, also, in the observation that the electorate were not, in fact, voting for another governing principle altogether, but simply expressing disenchantment for unfulfilled pledges and promises. Still, the stuff of data, analysis and scrutiny is only half the political story, with the other dimension being the more elusive realms of intuition, seizing the mood of the collective, responding to an evolving psychology.

It is here that Anwar Ibrahim perhaps shines best, especially since his release from imprisonment. His initial release from captivity was met, initially, with a combined sense of incredulity and curiosity on the part of the national media who, for several months, provided a healthy serving of Anwar-speak before the falling of the veil and an ensuing loud silence, that was broken, though not infrequently, often only by a pejorative comment culled from here and there.

For Anwar whose time in prison was spent not only reading—several times—*The Riverside Edition of The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (among others) but contemplating the very redefinition of Malaysian politics, there was little time to be spent awaiting the graces of the national media. Seizing the opportunities

afforded by the new media—notably the internet—while summoning that now legendary indefatigability for which he has always been known, he worked the ground instead, articulating his vision, shaping the experience, cultivating a strategy, testing the collective temperament through the various contemporary mediums and, most impressively, the traditional avenue of the ceramah.

While his period in captivity, and the experience of smut and violence which preceded it, were often dealt with in the form of asides and with quite some humour on such occasions, manifest in the highly personalized and charged engagement with the wider Malaysian public was a deeper vindication. He appeared to beckon the words of the Shakespeare he read with zeal—“If it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul”—while articulating his ideas about the failures of the New Economic Policy, devising the New Economic Agenda, advocating justice for all—bringing the case of the marginalised rural communities of the Malay heartland to the attention of a gritty, urban Chinese audience in urban Kuala Lumpur, while explaining the call for just and due process for Kalliamma, the widow of M. Moorthy, to an audience of Felda settlers.

If the transformation of the Malaysian political landscape can be attributed to Anwar Ibrahim, it is largely due to the fact that he has been able to harness an opposition, once driven by ideological disparities, into a workable political alternative, replete, given the religious and racial composition and power proportions, with its own innate checks and balances. His thumping victory in July’s by-election in Permatang Pauh and his return to parliament as Leader of the Opposition have further reconciled his hard-headed idealism with his realization that worthwhile and durable politics can only be played out in the real world.

His ‘vision’ of a multi-racial and an equitable Malaysia has been met, frequently, with its own obstacles and interruptions, not least by the constant need to offer reassurances to allay all constituencies. To Anwar doubters, his vision is hardly a vision at all, merely the refractions of opportunism by an opportunist who would do anything to win—as if there were anything inherently wrong in wanting to win, especially given that in the quest of shaping that vision he had everything to lose.

A different governing principle remains a far reach for the Malaysian landscape, but following the events of March 8th this, at the very least, is formative. In spite of the fact that some continue to grapple with fundamental issues affecting nation, state and populace that have come to the fore, the trend towards further transformation of the political landscape is inexorable. As Anwar himself remarked in 2004;

“In all my experiences in university politics, ABIM and UMNO, I had believed that the easier option is to go through racial based politics. But now I am talking about the right option for the present and the future, for Malaysia sekarang and the new Malaysia which has to be a multi-racial entity. This is so much more difficult because you have to grapple with every issue, argue every case, but that’s how life is. Unless, of course, you choose an authoritarian system. Then everyone keeps quiet and carries on with whatever they do”.

The close of 2008 witnesses a system still grappling with the now formal presence of Anwar Ibrahim; a system that has, in recent months, even attempted to turn the world back a decade on its praxis. But within the firm tide of change that has swept the world these past several months, the question confronting Anwar Ibrahim is “Can He?” To which the answer, given a missed date or two, must surely be, “He has been able to...so far”. ■



Meeting the press: Anwar speaking to journalists as he leaves the ACA office in Putrajaya yesterday.

Anwar: Meetings not a cause for concern

PUTRAJAYA: Meetings between Umno and PAS do not pose a threat to the Pakatan Rakyat or Parti Keadilan Rakyat, says PKR adviser Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Their meetings were not a problem to him, he said and added that both his wife PKR president Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and vice-president Azmin Ali had also met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on several occasions.

"PAS' Ustaz (Datuk Seri) Hadi (Awang) had said that there were

meetings between individuals from the party. I don't find this a problem," he told reporters yesterday after leaving the Anti-Corruption Agency where he had gone to give his statement on alleged fabrication of evidence during investigations into the "black eye" incident in 1998.

When asked on Abdullah's assurance for his safety and having the investigation conducted professionally without the interference of Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Musa Hassan and Attorney-General Tan Sri Gani Patail, Anwar said he

appreciated it but that Abdullah was one month too late.

On the statement given to the ACA yesterday, Anwar said he had given all details and documents to the agency.

Anwar added that he was saddened that Kuala Lumpur Hospital director said he was not stripped naked.

He said he was under police custody and had to do what they told him to do, including filling up a form for rape victims, otherwise he would be reported as being uncooperative.

A sneak peek at his battle plan

Keadilan has struck deal to split electoral seats, says Anwar, who is prepared to contest in by-elections

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AMID rising election fever in Malaysia, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim (picture) yesterday offered friends and foes a sneak preview of his party's game plan — which includes a deal with a key opposition party.

Mr Anwar announced that after months of negotiations, his Keadilan party had finalised a deal with the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) to divide the electoral seats between them in Penang.

"Nobody believed that it could be reached and we have reached it early enough, long before the resolution by Parliament on elections," Mr Anwar said at a press conference here, on the sidelines of the



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Regional Outlook Forum 2008 organised by the Institute of South-east Asian Studies (Iseas). Mr Anwar added that he was confident that the opposition parties would turn in a

good showing during the general election.

"Objectively, if the election is free and fair, we will produce a very impressive performance. I have no doubt about that," said Mr Anwar, who has been using his overseas trips to publicise his political views.

An Indonesian television station came under fire recently by Malaysia's Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin for airing an interview with Mr Anwar.

Mr Anwar's optimistic assessment came despite the fact that his Keadilan party failed to defeat the ruling Barisan Nasional in a closely fought by-election in the small constituency of Ipoh last April.

In that contest, Keadilan managed to net only about 5 per cent of votes from ethnic Indians in the Indian-majority constituency.

But Mr Anwar believes that the Indian community's dissatisfaction with the government — embodied by the street protests

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The screenshot shows the website for Anwar Ibrahim, titled "The Voice of Democracy in Malaysia". It features a navigation menu with links for Home, About Anwar, Issues, News, Events, Media, Blog, and Contact. There is a sign-up form for a newsletter with fields for Email ID and Zip Code. A "LATEST VIDEO" section displays a video titled "Riz Khan's One on One - Anwar Ibrahim". A "FROM THE BLOG" section lists several articles, including "Pindah kees Anwar didensar 5 Feb 11/20/2008" and "DSAI Menahantar Usul Untuk Menagguhkan Dewan Rakyat 11/20/2008". A "MAKE A DIFFERENCE" sidebar contains buttons for "Online Contribution", "Request to Speak", "Join Anwar", "Spread the Word", and "Request for Interview".

THE ROAD AHEAD

IN CONVERSATION WITH
DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM

YOU EMERGED FROM PRISON FOUR YEARS AGO CONSUMED, IN YOUR WORDS, "WITH A GREATER PASSION FOR FREEDOM". SINCE THEN, HOW HAS THIS BEEN REALISED, IN PRACTICAL TERMS, FOR YOU? The multi-ethnic People's Justice Party, forged during the '98 Reformasi period, remains the best vehicle through which to pursue political and social reform of a sclerotic system. Our progress in a few short years has been enormous and unprecedented. Our efforts, combined with the commitment of the other members of the opposition coalition, has resonated with the latent concerns of the Malaysian electorate that expressed itself with seismic effect in the historic general election of 8th March 2008, in which we more than quadrupled our representation in Parliament and wrested control of four state governments from the ruling party.

SINCE YOUR RELEASE, YOU HAVE TRAVELLED WIDELY AND ENGAGED



INTIMATELY WITH A NATION IN RAPID SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION. WHAT, IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, IS MALAYSIA'S PRINCIPAL CHALLENGE? Fulfillment of the dispensation vouchsafed the nation by the contents of the Proclamation of Independence and the Merdeka Constitution of 1957. That process of fulfillment has been delayed, denied and mangled by 51 years of Barisan Nasional rule. The nation's principal challenge is how to bring about grand rectification to a process that has been ripped off the rails and needs to be put back on track.

THE SUCCESS OF YOUR EFFORTS AT BECKONING THE ROLE OF MODERATOR AMONG PRINCIPAL POLITICAL PARTIES OF THE OPPOSITION WAS AFFIRMED IN THE MARCH 8TH ELECTIONS. HOW DIFFICULT A ROLE HAS THAT BEEN? The difficulty lay in how to make opposition political parties realize that that which unites them in a common

agenda to pursue the ideals of freedom, democracy and reform is greater than that which divides them into entities with seemingly conflicting ideologies. There are bumps along the road — there have to be as we are sailing in uncharted waters and coalitions do not build themselves. But we've made great progress and I am confident about the future.

AFTER MUCH ANALYSIS, RANGING FROM THE EUPHORIC TO THE CYNICAL, ABOUT THE EVENTS OF MARCH 8TH, WHAT DO YOU, PERSONALLY, BELIEVE TO BE THE MESSAGE SENT OUT BY VOTERS IN THE LAST ELECTION? The message is that they want the forms of political representation translated into the substance of democratic living. They want change to a moribund and sclerotic political culture that has brought one of Southeast Asia's most promising

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economies to declension and desuetude. And I think most importantly—there was an awakening in this country—people realized that votes do matter and by exercising that right they can play a part in charting the future course of the nation.

YOU HAVE TRIUMPHED IN A BY ELECTION AND MADE A CEREMONIOUS RETURN TO PARLIAMENT AS LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION. BUT HOW MUCH, REALLY, HAS CHANGED IN THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE?

The road on which emerging democracies travel is generally one-way and I cannot see the nation going back from whence it came. Politically so much has changed. Autocratic action and oligarchic measures are challenged at every turn. Corruption which was before deemed acceptable is now fiercely debated in Parliament and condemned on blogs, and among civil society. The undemocratic measures taken by the government are challenged—and occasionally overturned. Certainly the end goal includes structural reform like freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary—and for that one requires political power. But the movement for change is inexorable and the gains made thus far give reason for much hope.

MUCH HAS BEEN SAID OF THE INFLUENCE OF 'THE YOUNG' IN INDUCING CHANGE THE WORLD OVER; DO YOU BELIEVE THAT TO BE TRUE? WHY?

What is true the world over is no less pertinent to Malaysia. The younger generation senses the need for progress and for the nation to discard the hang-ups of the past. Asian values—the idea that Asian people must be subservient to authority—has no more traction on those plugged into a globalised world. They want



Anwar Ibrahim on the opposite side of the bench as opposition leader



freedom, they need to express creativity and they want to compete and be active in shaping a future that is better than the past. Without the energy and idealism of the youth, no movement for political and social change can hope to succeed. All the signs in Malaysia point to the young being the harbingers of that change.

YOU HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN MANY EFFORTS AT RESOLVING CONFLICTS AND MODERATING CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES IN A DEEPLY POLARISED WORLD. ARE THE DIVISIONS BLURRING OR HAVE THEY BECOME GREATER?

Immanuel Kant said that progress would come to humanity through intellectual and moral enlightenment or through the experience of chaos. In a conflicted world, you cannot wait for the exhaustion that follows on incessant conflict to build a newer world. You have to do it by the relentless search for the better angels of the human spirit that will douse conflict and allow for the building of a better world. For that we must recapture the spirit of engagement without which ideas perish and ideology drives mankind further and further apart.

THE CLARION CALL OF 2008—FROM THE ANTIPODES TO ACROSS THE ATLANTIC—HAS BEEN ONE OF "CHANGE". WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE "CHANGE" MEANS, IN SUBSTANTIVE TERMS?

This change in substantive terms is actually the realization of what one's society is in dire need of at any one time. In Malaysia, it is the need for the people's freedom from the bondage of a system that has held them in a thrall at

once emasculating and ossifying. Substantively we are talking about an end to racial politics, greater accountability, respect for the rule of law and a commitment to safeguarding basic human rights.

THE WRITER V.S NAIPAUL ONCE DESCRIBED YOU AS "A MAN WHO APPEARED TO BE THINKING THINGS THROUGH". WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT? HAS THAT CHANGED?

I think Naipaul, in saying that, was giving expression to something he would amplify in his 2001 Nobel Lecture when he cited Marcel Proust's idea of artistic creation. Naipaul said that Proust's way of proceeding was to intuit that indistinct melody he feels he was born with and bring it to fruition. Perhaps what Naipaul would have seen in me a few decades ago was my struggle to flesh out the blurred memory of truths I early in my life felt prompting and leading me. All of subsequent life was a sequel to that preamble.

YOU HAVE ALSO BEEN DESCRIBED AS AN "INCURABLE IDEALIST". IS THERE STILL SPACE FOR IDEALISM IN AN INCREASINGLY TACTILE WORLD?

I believe that if you have an idea, and if it is good and true, it will soon create reality. In other words, ideas have consequences and good ideas eventuate in salubrious realities. Of course, harsh realities are always defeating ideals but ideals have a way of taking their revenge upon facts that momentarily imprison them. In Malaysia, we have long been captive to the dispiriting reality of the politics of race. The idealistic among us struggled for liberation from its stultifying confines. Last March, at the general election, the ideal of a race-free politics wreaked vengeance on this reality. Now, all of post-election realities are sequel to that liberation. But if there was no harkening after that ideal of liberation, there would no emancipation from those grinding realities of race. Change, then, is brought about by the idealistic and the questing. ■