

ANWAR ON TRIAL: In the Face of Injustice. By *Pawancheek Marican*. *Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Gerakbudaya Enterprise, 2009. xvi, 386 pp. (B&W photos, illus.) MYR50.00 ISBN 978-983-44793-2-9.*

This is an important book for specialists in the legal fraternity, so too for political analysts of Malaysia. *Anwar on Trial* is virtually a metaphor for “Malaysia on trial.” While the book, by one of Anwar Ibrahim’s lawyers, is openly partisan, it has been written in a lucid style and packed with all the facts that one needs to know about the first trial of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, which lasted 76 days in the months of September, October and November. The book then is about Anwar Ibrahim’s so-called “corruption trial.” In a nutshell, Anwar was accused of using his political clout as deputy prime minister to direct his subordinates to conceal evidence regarding his homosexual behaviour, and this constituted an alleged act of political corruption.

Marican provides us with a detailed account of the charges, the proceedings, including the cases of the prosecution and the defence, the appeal to the Federal Court, the final judgment of the court and the post-appeal review. There was then the second, perhaps even more sensational, trial of Anwar, the sodomy trial, which lasted 118 days, in which Anwar was tried along with his adopted brother, Sukma Darmawan Sasmitaat Madja, in 1999. The book is not about this second trial although important details of this trial are found in the appendix. At the second trial, Anwar was sentenced to nine years jail, but in May 2004, Anwar and Sukma were acquitted of those charges. At the point of acquittal, he had served out his sentence of six years jail time from the first trial.

Marican’s book is important for a number of reasons. First, it is the only full account and complete record of Anwar’s first trial. Second, by reporting clearly the manner in which this trial was conducted, the evidence of witnesses for the prosecution and the defence, and the respective final submissions, readers can judge for themselves the merits of each case. Third, without question, there are significant implications stemming from this highly charged political trial with regard to the functioning of the Malaysian legal system and Malaysia’s practice of the rule of law. Marican has argued that Anwar’s trials epitomize “the emasculation of Malaysia’s democratic institutions” and that “the rule of law was flouted” (xvi). It is best, of course, that readers decide for themselves if this was the case and certainly the book provides enough details for anyone to form such an opinion.

The political character of the trial was never in doubt. On 2 September 1998 Anwar was dismissed as the deputy prime minister cum finance minister of Malaysia by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. He was subsequently arrested and detained under the country’s draconian Internal Security Act. In jail, Anwar was beaten unconscious by the then inspector general of police, Rahim Noor, who was later convicted in 2000 for this act. Prior to Anwar’s sacking, in early 1998, a political tract entitled “Fifty Reasons why

Anwar should not become Prime Minister” (written in Malay) was widely circulated. Among other sensational allegations, this dubious piece of writing contained innuendos that Anwar was a homosexual. Soon after the tract’s release, Mahathir declared that he could not countenance a homosexual to be a leader of Malaysia. Social scientists could certainly also draw on the facts surrounding the case to illustrate the international repercussions of the Anwar trials. A rendering of such reactions is found in chapter 5.

The relevance of the book today is that Anwar’s new trial, dubbed Sodomy II, is almost a carbon copy of the first—an instance of *déjà vu*. In February 2010, Anwar was again in the dock on the allegation that he had sodomized a 24-year-old political aide, Saiful Bokhari Azlan, sometime in 2008. The circumstances surrounding this new trial are again highly charged and have more than a hint of politics. Anwar Ibrahim, now leader of the opposition in Parliament, had just led with great success the new opposition People’s Alliance in a general election on March 8, 2008, which saw the egregious collapse of four state governments and the denial of the two-thirds parliamentary majority of the ruling party, the National Front. Saiful, Anwar’s accuser, admitted meeting with the Prime Minister Najib Razak to discuss his liaison with Anwar. Will history repeat itself? Many think it will. At the point of writing, the trial is ongoing.

Finally, it should be mentioned that since Anwar’s first trial many of the main personae involved have passed on: the former attorney general, Mohtar Abdullah; the High Court judge, Augustine Paul; the lawyer Christopher Fernando; and Anwar accuser Khalid Jafri. Anwar sympathizers may see this as poetic justice, as Anwar’s own presence in Malaysian politics remains larger than life.

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