

# THE MALAY DILEMMA

*A once imprisoned politician may be his country's best chance for reform.*

BY IAN BURUMA

Anwar Ibrahim's voice was barely audible above the background din of chattering guests and a cocktail-bar pianist at the Hilton Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. Anwar—who had rebounded from six years in prison on corruption and sodomy charges to become the best hope for a more democratic, less corrupt Malaysia—speaks softly. He is still under constant surveillance, he said. Sensitive political business has to be handled in other capitals—Jakarta, Bangkok, or Hong Kong. Security is a constant worry. Intelligence sources from three countries have warned him to be careful. “I’m taking a big risk just walking into this hotel to see you, but what can I do?” he murmured. “It’s all too exhausting. But, you know, sometimes you just have to take risks.”

This was the same Anwar Ibrahim, one struggled to remember, who was once at the heart of the Malaysian establishment: the Minister of Culture in 1983, the Minister of Education in 1986, the Minister of Finance in 1991, a Deputy Prime Minister in 1993. He was poised to succeed Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad. And then he got overconfident. Starting in the summer of 1997, when the Malaysian currency and stock market lost more than half of their value in the Asian financial meltdown, Anwar did something that Mahathir found unforgivable. (Malaysians mostly don’t use family names; last names are generally patronyms.) Even as the Prime Minister was imposing capital controls and blaming “rogue speculators,” such as George Soros, for the crisis, Anwar launched an attack on “nepotism” and “cronism” in

his own party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which had been in power since independence. The “cronies” included members of Mahathir’s family. While Mahathir tried to bail out banks and corporations run by his allies, Anwar talked about transparency and accepting some of the International Monetary Fund’s recommenda-



*Can Islamists and liberals unite against a corrupt status quo?*

tions for liberalizing the economy.

Mahathir does not like to be contradicted. In 1998, Anwar was removed from the cabinet and from UMNO. He was charged with corruption, and with sodomizing his speechwriter and his wife’s chauffeur, and convicted. Under Malaysian law, “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” carries a sentence of

up to twenty years. Anwar denied everything and took to the road, addressing crowds all over the country. When he was barred from speaking in halls, he spoke in mosques or parking lots, standing on top of trucks or cars. “The government is trying to keep the people away from me,” he declared. “I am not afraid. No matter what happens, whether in prison . . . I will still strive, I will still fight, I will not step down.” While awaiting trial, Anwar was badly beaten by the chief of police, and he says that attempts were made to poison him.

After his arrest, Anwar says, Mahathir gave a slide show for his cabinet colleagues, to justify the purge of his former heir apparent. There were photographs of current and former U.S. officials—Robert

Rubin, William Cohen, and Paul Wolfowitz—along with the World Bank president, James Wolfensohn. “These are the people behind Anwar,” Mahathir explained. (Mahathir denies showing any pictures but allows, “I informed the cabinet about Anwar’s associates.”) Nobody was likely to miss the implication; Mahathir has clearly stated his conviction that “Jews rule this world by proxy.” At the Hilton, Anwar, who started his career as the president of the Malaysian Muslim Students Union, and is still a devout Muslim, shrugged. “They say I’m a Jewish agent, because of my friendship with Paul,” he said. “They also accuse me of being a lackey of the Chinese.” His eyebrows twitched in a gesture of disbelief, and he emitted a dry, barking laugh.

When Anwar was released from prison, in 2004, after six years in solitary confinement, he announced that he would return to politics. Last year, Mahathir was asked by a reporter whether he thought Anwar would ever be the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Mahathir replied that “he would make a good Prime Minister of Israel.” So far, it looks as though Mahathir has underestimated his man. Anwar was returned to parliament last year in a landslide (his constituency is in Penang, on the northwest coast). His coalition of op-

position parties—which includes both a secular, mostly Chinese party and the Islamists of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, or PAS, as well as his own multi-ethnic People's Justice Party (P.K.R.)—has taken more than a third of the seats in parliament, and several state governments. In the next general election, possibly as soon as 2010, Anwar Ibrahim may well become the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

To make sense of Anwar's rise, fall, and rise, it helps to know something about the role of race and religion in Malaysia. The country's population is more than half Malay, defined by ethnicity and the Muslim faith, but large numbers of Chinese (now about a quarter of the population) and Indians (seven per cent) arrived in the nineteenth century, when the British imported coolies from China and plantation workers from India. Tensions arising from this *mélange*—and, in particular, the fear held by Malays that they will always be bested by these minorities—have gripped Malaysian politics since the country achieved independence from the British, in 1957. In recent years, the situation has been further complicated by a surge in Islamic fervor among many Malays.

Mahathir, whose father had some Indian ancestry, had always been obsessed with race, and the modern era of Malaysian politics can be traced to his

book "The Malay Dilemma," published in 1970, a decade before he came to power. It is a distillation of the kind of social Darwinism imbibed by Southeast Asians of Mahathir's cohort through their colonial education. The Malay race, the book argues, couldn't compete with the Chinese for genetic reasons. Whereas the Chinese had been hardened over the centuries by harsh climates and fierce competition, the Malays were a lazy breed, fattened by an abundance of food under the tropical sun. Unfettered competition with the Chinese "would subject the Malays to the primitive laws that enable only the fittest to survive," Mahathir warned his fellow-nationals. "If this is done it would perhaps be possible to breed a hardy and resourceful race capable of competing against all comers. Unfortunately, we do not have four thousand years to play around with."

And so the Malays had to be protected by systematic affirmative action: awarded top positions and mandatory ownership of business enterprises, along with preferential treatment in public schools, universities, the armed forces, the police, and the government bureaucracy. Otherwise the "immigrants," as the ruling party still calls the Chinese and the Indians, would take over.

"The Malay Dilemma" was immediately banned for being divisive. The country was still reeling from the race riots of

1969, when, after a predominately Chinese party enjoyed an election victory, hundreds of Chinese were attacked by Malays. Killings led to counter-killings. Such intergroup tensions were hardly new: ever since Britain left its former colony, political parties have used ethnic resentments to gain votes, while PAS sought to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state. Presiding over this fraught mosaic of ethnic and religious politics throughout the nineteen-sixties was the aristocratic Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman—until, in the fall of 1970, he was brought down by the brand of Malay nationalism advocated in Mahathir's book.

Despite the ban, activists succeeded in distributing copies to nationalistic Malay students. One of them was the young Anwar Ibrahim, then president of the Malaysian Muslim Students Union. Over the decade that followed, Anwar and Mahathir steadily gained influence. By 1981, Mahathir was Prime Minister. A year later, Anwar, who could easily have joined the Islamists in PAS, was brought into the government to help put Mahathir's ethnic theories into practice through the so-called New Economic Policy. He continued to do so until the late nineteen-nineties, when the consequences had become too blatant to ignore: a bloated (in all senses of the word) Malay elite was raking in more and more of the country's wealth; educated young Chinese and Indians were leaving the country in droves; and poor Malays were being kept in a state of fear by the propaganda in public schools and in the state-controlled press. Without their special status, the Malays were told, they would be at the mercy of those rapacious, dominating Chinese "immigrants." Meanwhile, Mahathir's rule had grown increasingly autocratic. In 2003, he was succeeded by the more amiable Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who promised reform but delivered little. Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, a confidant of Mahathir's, told me that, if anything, corruption has grown worse. "They're making hay while the sun still shines."

To challenge UMNO's ethnic policies is still to court serious trouble. I met Professor Lim Teck Ghee, a Chinese Malaysian and a former World Bank social scientist, at a restaurant in Brickfields, a largely Indian section near the central station of Kuala Lumpur. A soft-spoken



*"I hope you like sports metaphors."*

man, peering sadly through his glasses, Lim was the director of a leading economic think tank until he published, in 2006, a careful analysis showing that Malays, far from being dominated by the Chinese, actually owned more than forty-five per cent of corporate equity in publicly listed companies. He was quickly vilified for being “anti-national,” and he resigned his post.

Lim was one of several people I spoke to in Malaysia who used the word “apartheid” in describing his country. “The ethnic situation has become much worse,” he said, especially since Malay nationalism took a strong Islamic turn in the late nineteen-eighties, when the UMNO Party was challenged by the Islamists of PAS. The Islamists got a boost from the Iranian Revolution, and actually took power in the mostly Malay state of Kelantan in 1990. To preempt the Islamists, UMNO, ostensibly a secular party, wedded its ethnic nationalism (which was decidedly not a feature of PAS) to religion: Muslims were no longer supposed to drink alcohol; women were encouraged to wear head scarves (*tudung*); easygoing Malay Islam took on the harsher tone of Wahhabi purism.

The increasing conservatism of Malaysian Islam probably stems from insecurity and envy, more than from religious values. Lacking the powerful cultural and historical traditions of the Chinese and the Indians, Malays have been vulnerable to the inroads of Saudi-style Islam. It gives them an identity, a sense of belonging to something stronger than their village traditions. Meanwhile, in Lim’s view, educated Malays have been too timid to resist, whatever they might do or say in private. “I’ve seen it happening with my progressive university friends,” Lim said. “Wives take to wearing the *tudung*, the daughters cover up. Their passivity, their silence, is very bad for the community, because it allows the ultras to set the agenda. Islam has become more and more conservative. Muslims can no longer go to non-Malay restaurants or visit the houses of non-Malay friends. Tensions have grown. We’re reverting to the colonial situation, where the different races only meet in the marketplace.”

Lim’s children have already left the country; a daughter is in Seattle, a son in Sydney. He sighed. “Even young Malays are leaving,” he went on. “They can’t

stomach the hypocrisy, the dishonesty.” Then he said something that I would hear, over and over, from many others: “The sad thing is that Malaysia could have been so good—we could have been a model of multi-ethnic harmony.” A sense of disappointment was palpable in most conversations I had with Chinese and Indian Malaysians, not least among those who once supported the privileging of Malays, in order to redress colonial imbalances and raise the prospects of the rural *bumiputera*, the “sons of the soil.” It was also clear that such disillusionment can easily turn to hostility.

I saw Mahathir, whose views are still widely read on his daily blog, Che Det, at a demonstration protesting the Israeli attack on Gaza. As I arrived at the Bangsar Sports Complex, he was finishing his diatribe against “the Jews” and “Jewish atrocities,” wildly cheered by groups of schoolchildren in Palestinian-style scarves and black *tudung*. They disappeared as soon as the former Prime Minister, smiling a little menacingly at the young, left the scene. Later, I read in a newspaper that the Malaysian government had planned to mobilize “about five million pupils and 360,765 teachers from more than 10,000 schools,” to protest against what posters in the Bangsar Sports Complex termed “Holocaust II.”

I looked around the now depleted hall, and was puzzled by posters that read, in Malay, “Stop the atrocities against us.” I turned to an elderly Chinese-looking gentleman sitting behind me. “Who is this ‘us’?” I asked. With a sly grin, he replied, “Don’t you know? It means the Malays.” What atrocities had the Israelis perpetrated against the Malays? “Palestinians, Malays—they’re all Muslims,” the old man said. He shifted his chair closer. “I’m just here to observe,” he said, lowering his voice. “I’m not pro-Palestinian at all. I have Jewish friends, you know. Lend a hundred thousand dollars to a Jew and you’ll always get it back. Lend it to a Muslim and he’ll cheat you, for sure. They’re all liars and cheats, the Muslims.”

Anwar’s daughter, Nurul Izzah, then entered the hall. The sports complex happened to be in her constituency. She had been elected as a member of parliament for the People’s Justice Party in 2008. Izzah had not been especially eager

to be a politician, having just given birth that year. But when Anwar was imprisoned, and his wife, Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, took his place as an opposition leader, politics became something of a family enterprise.

Nurul Izzah, now twenty-eight, is popular, especially among the young. She has her father’s gift for public speaking, and is remarkably beautiful. She got up on the stage and shouted slogans in English about Israel being founded on bloodshed. When she sat down, she whispered to me, “Did you notice how they took away the microphone?” Referring to the official media, she said, “That’s how much they love me.” The vigorous government campaign against Israel had taken the opposition by surprise, and she felt that she had to make a statement. But the government evidently did not wish to share its Muslim solidarity with the opposition.

I asked Izzah when she started wearing a *tudung*. “Since I was eighteen,” she replied. Later that year, her father was jailed. “In the darkest hours, you turn to God. We were never forced into wearing the *tudung*. It was my decision. My father was alarmed.” In fact, Izzah was sent to a Catholic convent school outside the capital, and studied international relations at Johns Hopkins. Her best friend is a half-Welsh Catholic. “I can’t remember many verses of the Koran,” she said, with a polite giggle, “but I felt it was my duty as a Muslim to wear the *tudung*. I did face some challenges.” As a student, she told me, “My crowd was mostly liberal. So friends sometimes felt uncomfortable. Couldn’t go clubbing and that sort of thing.”

Nurul Izzah was asked to run for office, she explained, “because it was important for the P.K.R. to have a young generation that supports multiracial politics. But, you know, to run for the opposition is suicidal for a future career in this country.”

Despite what must have been a very difficult childhood, she had a refreshing lack of bitterness, and spoke with a sense of humor, even a guarded optimism. I had noticed this quality in others of her age, including Chinese and Indians, who were working for N.G.O.s, writing blogs, or organizing local communities. Some have backgrounds in the community: I met Indian and Chinese politicians who



started in labor unions. Others have studied abroad and decided to return, as activists or journalists. The most popular blogger is the half-Welsh, half-Malaysian scion of a royal family. (Most Malaysian states still have sultans.) The two founders of Malaysiakini, the country's best online news site, met as students in Australia. Some are religious; many are not. But everyone, even Lim Teck Ghee, a staunch atheist, seems to agree that the chances of Malaysia's becoming a more democratic, less racist society depend almost entirely on the former Muslim student leader who helped institutionalize Malay nationalism: Anwar Ibrahim.

His arrest in 1998 was probably the making of him as an opposition leader. It came at a time when Malaysian society was beginning to open up, especially on the Internet. One of Mahathir's ambitions was to make Malaysia into an Asian Silicon Valley. Foreign companies were invited to invest in a "Multimedia Super Corridor" between the new international airport and the twin Petronas Towers (also known as Mahathir's Erections), which rise like gigantic pewter cocktail shakers in the center of Kuala Lumpur. An international committee of experts, including Bill Gates, advised Mahathir that, if he wished to attract foreign investment, censoring the Internet would be unwise. As a result, Malaysian readers now have access to news and commentary that is independent of the government.

Steven Gan, a Malaysian Chinese, is one of the founders of Malaysiakini.com. Inspired by Anwar's call for *reformasi*, political change, he launched the site with his partner, Premesh Chandran, in November of 1999. On the night of Anwar's arrest, ten thousand people had turned out to listen to his speech against bribery, ethnic discrimination, and rule by decree. *Reformasi* became the rallying cry of all those who felt disaffected by the corrupt autocracy that Malaysia had become. Every Malaysian able to go online knew what Anwar said when he was sentenced at his trial: "I have been dealt a judgment that stinks to high heaven. . . . The corrupt and despicable conspirators are like worms wriggling in the hot sun. A new dawn is breaking in Malaysia. Let us cleanse our beloved nation of the filth and garbage left behind by the conspira-

tors. Let us rebuild a bright new Malaysia for our children."

"When we launched Malaysiakini, we had five hundred readers," Gan told me in a sidewalk café near his office. "By the time the decision went against Anwar in the sodomy trial, we had three hundred thousand." Malaysiakini, which has paid subscribers, actually makes a profit.

One of the effects of Malaysiakini—and of a number of immensely popular bloggers, such as Raja Petra Kamarudin and Haris Ibrahim—is the emergence of a genuinely multi-ethnic debate. Raja Petra is the aristocrat, related to the Sultan of Selangor. Haris is a half-Malay lawyer. Another influential figure is Jeff Ooi Chuan Aun, a Chinese I.T. consultant turned politician. Divisions that exist in daily life seem to fade away online. Malaysiakini is published in English, Malay, Tamil, and Chinese. "Malaysiakini has provided a platform for different communities to express themselves on sensitive issues, like N.E.P., Islam, human rights," Gan says. "More non-Malays are finding their voice. They no longer feel they need to leave their country."

The demonstration on the night of Anwar's arrest was largely a Malay affair; it took a little longer for the minorities to stir in public. Indians had largely supported the ruling National Front, which was led by UMNO and backed by the Malaysian Indian Congress party. This changed in November of 2007, when thousands of Indians marched in the streets to deliver a petition to the British High Commission, insisting that the British take responsibility for the treatment of Indians under colonial rule. It was really a stunt to protest against ethnic discrimination. But the petition never reached the High Commissioner: soldiers and riot police with water cannons and tear gas cracked down on the protesters with maximum force.

"I shall never forget that day," Charles Santiago, an Indian M.P. who took part in the protests, told me. "There was pent-up frustration there before, but that day something snapped." The frustration had



many sources: blocked job prospects, discrimination in education and property ownership, destruction of Hindu temples, young Indian men dying mysteriously in police stations and prisons. "The point of the petition was to raise consciousness among Indians about their rights, to embarrass the government," Santiago explained. "But the crackdown was so heavy-handed that even the Chinese became sympathetic to our cause." It was the first time, Santiago said, that "people of all stripes, rich and poor, went into the streets to make a point—this is what broke the back of UMNO." The Malaysian Indian Congress lost heavily in the March, 2008, elections, as did the Malaysian Chinese Association. Many Indians and Chinese voted for Anwar's P.K.R.

But the most important transformation over the past decade probably occurred in the mind of Anwar himself. He had long been critical of government policies, but almost up to the time of his arrest he was still regarded as a rather arrogant UMNO man. I tried to picture the haughty technocrat as he smiled at me in his daughter's sparsely furnished office at the P.K.R. headquarters. All I saw was a charmer, whose fine dark hair, snappy spectacles, and black goatee gave him the air of a jazz-loving hipster of the nineteen-fifties. Even at his own party headquarters, he spoke softly, sometimes in a whisper, aware that anything he said was likely to be overheard.

I asked him whether he had expected Mahathir—a man he had known for more than thirty years—to treat him so harshly. "Yes and no," he replied. "I didn't think he'd go that far. I'd seen him destroy opponents, but always short of using physical abuse."

The 1998 trial was a humiliating spectacle, with elements of dark comedy: a mattress with semen stains produced as evidence in court; police claims that Anwar had beaten himself up by pressing a glass onto his own face. Years of solitary confinement provided much time for thought. "Prison life is such that you have to impose a punishing discipline on yourself," Anwar told me. "Otherwise, you become lethargic, or a psycho." Deprived of books for the first six months, Anwar was eventually allowed to read Tocqueville, Shakespeare, Confucius, the Indian and Arabic classics. He

also received a subscription to *The New Yorker*. But there were times when he would have given anything to hear a human voice, even to be scolded by a guard. Family visits were always brief. His children would sing old pop songs to him. Anwar looked wistfully out the window as he sang the first bars of Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

The experience seems to have made him a humbler man. In an interview given three months after his release from prison, he told the Malaysian writer Eddin Khoo, "To be frank and honest, I cannot absolve myself entirely of the excesses of [Mahathir's] administration. There were some things that were beyond our control, other things we simply did not have the courage to address at that time."

A retired Indian civil servant told me about hearing Anwar speak in the district contested by his daughter in 2008. It was near midnight and pouring down rain, yet more than a thousand people waited until Anwar arrived, on the back of a motorcycle, drenched. When he spoke, the crowd fell silent, listening to every word. Then, suddenly, a number of Indians began to shout, in Tamil, "*Makkal Sakti!*"—"People Power! People Power!" And the Malays and Chinese repeated it after them, louder and louder—an unusual demonstration of multi-ethnic solidarity.

Anwar was arrested again, in the summer of 2008, for "sexual assault" on a strapping male aide, but it made no difference to his popularity. Allegations of sexual misconduct had become so clearly political that few people believed them, and the legal proceedings were farcical. Anwar was seized near his home by twenty commandos in balaclavas. The putative victim, who remains under "police protection," is rather strong to be overwhelmed by the much less physically imposing Anwar. The aide swore in a mosque, over the Koran, that he was speaking the truth. When an imam later claimed that he had been forced by superiors to witness these proceedings, he was dismissed. The offense was then changed from "sexual assault" to "consensual sex against the order of nature," even though the aide has yet to be charged. Anwar is not worried. "They just used it to embarrass me, but it did no good," he said. "They lost the elections anyway."



*"Hey, investor fears need calming over here, too."*

Anwar has not entirely shed his tendency toward arrogance. Weeks after the opposition won its victory in March of 2008, he announced that he was ready to take over the government that year. This was premature. It's true that the National Front government no longer commands a two-thirds majority in parliament, but there are many problems to overcome before Anwar's coalition of opposition parties is ready to rule the country. It could be another year or two before the next general election. And the current prime minister, Najib Tun Razak, has the image of being a more ruthless operator than his predecessor, the ineffectual Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Najib has been involved in a scandal of his own. A young Mongolian model who was a former mistress of a political crony was found blown to pieces in a jungle clearing near Kuala Lumpur in 2006. At first, it looked like a sordid case of blackmail: she wanted money from her lover, and he, in desperation, had her killed. Then things got more complicated. The men convicted of killing her were police officers in charge of security for top officials. The blogger Raja Petra signed a "statutory declaration" alleging that Najib's wife had been at the scene of the murder. He has since been charged with criminal defamation. Najib has denied any wrongdoing. For the two main contenders of leadership of Malaysia, the truth of the matter might prove to be less important than the public perception.

The fact that Anwar appears to be less vulnerable than Najib suggests that the Malaysian public is more inclined to believe a popular blogger than their unpopular Prime Minister.

One man who is desperate for Najib to succeed is Mahathir. When I spoke to Mahathir's confidant Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, who is a veteran UMNO political operator, about his party's fortunes, he sounded gloomy. UMNO, he told me, is like Chiang Kai-shek's corrupt nationalists in Shanghai in the nineteen-thirties. He ticked off the Party's many ills on his fingers: "corruption, ostentatious living, abuse of power, rank stupidity at the top . . ." So was Anwar going to win? "He will if Najib fails to deliver great changes," Abdullah Ahmad predicted. "Najib wants to, but he can't. He's surrounded by corrupt people."

It's not clear that Najib wants to make big changes, despite recent speeches denouncing corruption in Malaysian politics. Anwar does, but it's unclear whether he will be able to. The entrenched interests—Malay bureaucrats, Army officers, policemen, judges, businessmen, and politicians—will fight to hold on to their privileges. When I asked Anwar about this, he said that such resistance could be managed by reformulating the quotas rather than abolishing them. "Affirmative action would still be acceptable, but based on need, not on race," he said. "I tell PAS that Malays won't lose out. But there are poor Indians, and poor

Chinese, too, who should be helped.”

Class rather than race, then? Anwar laughed. “I don’t like the word ‘class,’” he said. “I’m not a Marxist.” He paused, and added, “But Adam Smith mentioned equality many times in his books, too.”

An advantage of replacing the rhetoric of race with that of class is that all opposition parties can agree on the ideal of equality. Religion is a more contentious matter. How to reconcile the Islamists and the secularists? Anwar prefers to finesse the problem, by “concentrating on what we have in common, not what divides us.” But PAS has stated its desire to introduce *hudud* laws for Muslim citizens—punishing criminal offenses with stoning, whipping, and amputation. Secularist partners in a federal government would find that hard to accept.

“Any party should be free to articulate its ideas,” Anwar says. “But no issue should be forced on non-Muslims. When I argue with Muslims, I cannot sound detached from rural Malays, like a typical Malay liberal, or sound like Kemal Atatürk. I would not reject Islamic law out of hand. But without the consent of the majority there is no way you can implement Islamic law as national law.”

I mentioned the case of a young Malay woman who no longer believed in Islam and wanted to marry a Christian. To do so, she would have to change her religious status. The secular authorities ruled that this was a matter for the Islamic court, but, of course, no Islamic court (whose authority she, as a nonbeliever, no longer recognized) would ever accede to apostasy. Her predicament has become a test case on the issue of Malay identity. After receiving death threats, she is now in hiding.

Anwar rolled his eyes. “Islamically, it is indefensible that all Malays should have to be Muslims,” he told me. “Not all Arabs are Muslims, after all. But this case has become too political. It is better not to dwell on this issue. We should deal with poverty, rule of law, democracy. . . .” I must have looked unsatisfied. “Look,” he said, “I have Malay friends who no longer believe, who drink. But they don’t make an issue out of it.”

I decided to visit the state of Kelantan, where PAS has been in power since 1990. Islamic laws have been introduced there for Muslims, though they are not always enforced. Muslims cannot drink al-

cohol. The lights must stay on in movie houses, and only morally acceptable films can be shown. (Some movie houses have gone out of business.) But nobody has been stoned for adultery or had limbs amputated. I drove across the country, through a succession of palm-oil plantations, in the company of Zaid Ibrahim, a wealthy liberal Malay lawyer who had resigned his post as minister of legal affairs in the Prime Minister’s office on a matter of principle—the first Malaysian cabinet minister to do so. He was against the arrests of political opponents, including Raja Petra, under the Internal Security Act.

We had met on a Sunday night in Kuala Lumpur a week before we embarked on our trip north. Zaid was happy, because PAS had scored an important by-election victory in the coastal city of Kuala Terengganu, dealing another blow to the National Front. He decided to celebrate the success of the Islamists with a lavish dinner in a fine restaurant. “A good result,” Zaid murmured, raising his glass to the men who wanted an Islamic state.

Although PAS won in the city, the state of Terengganu is still in National Front hands. “Look at those buildings,” Zaid said, as we drove through Terengganu on the way to Kelantan. We passed a vast stadium, a huge new airport, a gigantic new mosque, a convention center, a university, an “integrity institute.” All around these grandiose testimonies to human greed (and generous kickbacks) were typical Third World shantytowns: wooden shacks with corrugated iron roofs. “There is no money to be made out of building proper sewage systems or water supplies,” Zaid observed, with the dry chuckle of bitter experience.

Kelantan has hardly any huge buildings. Everything in the state capital, Kota Bharu, near the border with Thailand, is built on a modest scale. I met the PAS vice-president, Husam Musa, at the Party headquarters. Husam, an economist by training, is not an imam

but one of the new breed of professionals in Islamist politics. He was polite, if a little defensive. On the question of an Islamic state, he said this goal was often misunderstood: “We don’t mean a state ruled by clerics but one guided by the holy books. Without the books, we’d be like UMNO and just grab the money. The difference between us and them is that we believe we will be judged in the afterlife.”

He said that Islam was “pro-progress,” and that American democracy was a good model. (“Unfriendly people will accuse me of being pro-American for making this statement.”) He also said that discriminating against ethnic minorities was “un-Islamic,” as was government corruption. “People should be treated the same, and that includes the freedom of religion,” he said.

What about Muslims—were they free to renounce their faith? He averted his eyes. “I have my own opinion about that, but I will reserve it,” he said. “Media in Malaysia will interpret it in the wrong way. Everything here is turned to politics.” He used “politics” as a pejorative term. “I am not a politician,” he said. “I’m a Muslim activist.”

Few people in Kelantan, even the Chinese, openly complain about the PAS government. Non-Muslims don’t feel hampered by religious rules that don’t apply to them, and the lack of corruption is widely acknowledged. Still, given the chance, many young people leave for Kuala Lumpur. Several young Malays told me that it was “no fun” living in a place where you can get arrested for buying a beer. “This is a place for old men,” an unemployed building contractor said. “They can sit around and pray all day.”

The real Malay dilemma today is that democrats need the Islamists: Malay liberals and secular Chinese and Indians cannot form a governing alliance without religious and rural Malays. And the only serious contender who can patch over the differences between secularists and Islamists for the sake of reform is Anwar, a liberal Malay with impeccable Muslim credentials. “He is our last chance,” Zaid told me, as he celebrated the victory of PAS in Kuala Terengganu. When I repeated this to Anwar, he looked thoughtful and said, “Yes, and that’s what worries me.” ♦

