

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

**Transcript for Episode 9: Special Interview with Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim,
Chairman of IIIT and President of the People’s Party, Malaysia**

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Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim

Amina: Welcome everyone, this is Amina, and you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast for the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought. The purpose of our podcast (Third Space Thoughts to Policy) is to hear from experts and stakeholders in the field of education policy reform including policy advisors, governmental officials, academics, teachers, and parents. For IIIT, education is not just about mastering arithmetic and literacy, but improving community mindedness, moral reasoning, forgiveness, and empathy so that learning is a transformative process, improving society as a whole by advancing each individual spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. You can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, iTunes or Apple podcasts, and Messy.FM, as well as Podcast Mirror.

Our next guest is Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar Ibrahim is the leader of Malaysia’s ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition, President of the People’s Justice Party, and is expected to lead the country as its eighth Prime Minister. He served as Deputy Prime Minister from 1993-1998 and Finance Minister from 1991-1998. He was also the Minister of Education from 1986–1991. Since 1998, he has led the reform movement to strengthen democracy and the rule of law in the country. For his principled stance on issues of justice and the rule of law, he has spent over ten of the past 20 years in solitary confinement as a prisoner of conscience. He received a full pardon for all of the crimes alleged against him just days after his party won the 14th Malaysian General Election on the 9th of May 2018.

Anwar is highly regarded for his stance against corruption and his skillful management of the Malaysian economy during the Asian financial crisis. He has called for bold reforms to Malaysia’s political economy in order to remain competitive in the 21st century. He believes an independent judiciary, free media and respect for the rule of law are cornerstones on which Malaysia’s economic strength can be expanded. He further believes that the government must not ignore the plight of the poor and marginalized and should take active steps to create a humane economy. The multiethnic People’s Justice Party that he leads has provided a template for how Malaysia’s diverse ethnic and religious groups can work together towards a common national objective.

Throughout his career, Anwar has articulated a compelling argument in support of greater understanding between civilizations. At a time when many have described an inevitable clash, Anwar’s view is that dialogue is necessary and vital. Across the Muslim world, he has a unique ability and position to address the complex issues which hinder growth and development and demonstrate the compatibility of democracy with Muslim peoples.

Throughout his career, Anwar has held key positions in international institutions including President of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Council, Chairman

of the Development Committee of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, Honorary President of Accountability and member of the Advisory Board of the International Crisis Group. He was a Distinguished Visiting Professor and Malaysia Chair at the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, at Washington, DC. He has also taught at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and St Antony's College at the University of Oxford, lecturing on issues of governance, democracy and contemporary politics in Southeast Asia.

[Transition]

Assalamu alaikum Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim, how are you doing today?

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: Alhamdulillah, I am doing good.

Amina: Very good, very good! We're very excited to have you on our podcast today. We've been looking forward to this for such a long time and really appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today. So, we had just a few questions for you. So, some are already aware of this, but Malaysia already has Islamic Education for Muslim students and Moral Education for non-Muslim students incorporated into its curriculum nationally. In terms of how these subjects are being taught, what do you think works well already, and what do you seek to improve in the future?

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: Some of the initial presentation on the *fard 'ain*, basic knowledge, it's ok, acceptable. But I think the issue of understanding Islam, understanding Islam in the context of a multi-racial society, enhancing knowledge and practice, this I think certainly need further research and improving the pedagogy and also the curriculum. In terms of Moral Education, it remains to be a major controversy because the religious denominations amongst Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, say why can't the teachings of their religions be incorporated, and I think we also need to see the necessity of incorporating some of the more universal values so that they don't feel marginalized in any way.

Amina: I see, I see. Thank you. As you know, the overall objective of the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIT is the overall well-being for students through holistic, transformative education which addresses their socio-emotional and spiritual growth in addition to their progress in other areas of education. Malaysia's National Education Philosophy already focuses on this. Could you tell us a bit more about why this is?

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: Well the Education Philosophy in terms of holistic, comprehensive, and balance between spiritual and requirements of society, the issue of knowledge and ethics, was initially incorporated when I was Minister of Education a long time ago. And I think it is timely for them to reassess, and probably probe deeper to ensure that this sort of philosophical framework be effectively implemented, that the issue is not just the ritualistic understanding or dogmatic understanding, but to ensure the understanding of religion is *rahmat-ul-'alameen*, without neglecting the importance of our understanding of what *shariah* [is] in the context of the *maqasid al-shariah*. I think these are issues which may not necessarily be at the secondary level, but it must be well crafted so that teachers would be familiar with these requirements and priorities. But more pronounced is the need to ensure that education be given the priority, which most Muslim countries do not seem to appreciate. The amount of funds dispersed is very much limited, the effort to enhance the quality

is also questionable. And what they have done in the past is only to apply and impart or impose Western educational values and system into our societies without even rethinking about these subjects. I recall, Malek Bennabi once said about the need for the inner struggle of conscience that if Muslim societies are to advance, then they must start exercising their own belief system and thought whilst incorporating universal values, including from the West.

Amina: Very good, very good. So, at IIT, the Institute is very much concerned with intellectual discourse looking forward towards the future and operating within the context of what certain scholars refer to as “post-normal” times. Do you think Malaysia’s current education policy is doing the same, or is that something you think parliament or the Ministry of Education will need to incorporate into policy moving forward?

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: I think Malaysia has the initial start, at least awareness that spiritual and Islamic education must be incorporated into the national system, but I think, and I believe that this needs to be further evaluated beyond this rhetoric of Islam or Islamic education, or being dogmatic in our approach. We’re living in a very, as you said, “post-normal” times. It’s challenging, the pace of change is so fast.

Amina: Right, yeah.

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: (Continues) Which requires effective evaluation of thinkers and educationalists, we have to be deemed to be relevant, other than focusing purely on the classical text, which is a requirement, but we have to understand that the digital revolution brought about this phenomenal and unprecedented change, that our students, including in Islamic education, must be very familiar with.

Amina: Right, right. Very good. So, in addition to being Member of the Malaysian Parliament for Port Dickson and President of the People’s Justice Party, Chair of the new parliamentary caucus on reform and governance, and the soon to be Prime Minister of Malaysia, you are also the current Chairman of IIT. Why does your commitment to IIT matter to you as much as it does, and what do you hope to accomplish as Chairman while balancing all of your other roles?

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: See, I’m in a way very fortunate, because I am...during my younger days I was exposed to great intellectual luminaries and scholars who were involved in this institute, the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and in this *ma’had* (institute), we then situated ourselves with our intellectual gurus such as Ismail Al Faruqi to Sheikh Taha Jabir Al-Alwani and so many others, of virtue through our contact with the IIT. I mean scholars like Hussein Nasr, Qaradawi, and of course, our colleagues like Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman etc. And of course that gave us a different dimension about what is the priority, what is, to quote Faruqi, “the malaise of the ummah”, and then to be concerned about the challenge affecting the ummah and the world at large. And so in my work as parliamentarian, or in the Caucus of Reform, or even in Government, I think this basic understanding, intellectual and also of course our Islamic values, is very pertinent, because what is governance if it is devoid of ethics? What is change if it ignores the importance of moral code in our lives? And what’s modernity, if we don’t incorporate then the most pressing issues of our time? So, I think this role of IIT is phenomenal because it has given us the opportunity and avenue for a reasoned discourse, not a dogmatic ideological doctrine approach, but to encourage creative thought, to engage again as I said in a reasoned discourse.

Amina: I see, I see. Thank you. What would you say are the most pressing education policy issues in Malaysia right now and what do you think needs to be done in order to address them?

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: It's essentially an issue of quality education, it's not, even when we talk about Islamic education, it's not just about basic understanding of the gurus of the *fiqh*, what we are used to, but to ensure that our students fully comprehend the message of Islam in terms of the *'aqeedah* of course, the *akhlak*, the *shakhsiya*, and ensure they remain relevant and can play a meaningful role in a multiracial, multireligious society.

Amina: Very good, well thank you again very much for your time today, Dato Seri Anwar. It's been a pleasure and honor to speak with you today. I'm sure our listeners benefited tremendously from being able to hear what you have to say, and we look forward to keeping in touch.

Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim: Thank you, thank you.

[transition]

Amina: If you'd like more information on some of the words Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim mentioned, you can read books available at the IIIT library. To make an appointment, reach out to saber@iiit.org. That's s, a, b, e, r, at iiit.org. If you want to know more about *shariah* in particular, an often misunderstood concept, please see Professor John Esposito's book, *Shariah: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Dr. Esposito is the Director of The Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University where he also teaches. The Bridge Initiative is a multi-year research project on Islamophobia housed at Georgetown University. To find out more, you can visit bridge.georgetown.edu.

Also, Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim recently gave a lecture at IIIT in Herndon, VA at IIIT headquarters. To see the full video, you can visit IIITMedia on YouTube.

As mentioned last time, IIIT is currently accepting applications for its Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Master's Degree program in partnership with American University. So the International Training and Education Program-Advancing Education in Muslim Societies, also known as ITEP-AEMS, is a unique opportunity to earn a Master's Degree in International Education and Training, with a focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University. This program can be completed in one year and it is thirty credits. For more information, or if you are interested in applying, please visit www.iiit.org and then you can scroll to the bottom, and you'll find the announcement. Also, IIIT is currently accepting applications for its annual Summer Student Program. This is an intensive residential program in Islamic Studies and related subjects designed for graduate and exceptional senior undergraduate students. So, this program will take place from June 10 to June 28 of this year. Applicants should apply by March 15, 2019. To apply, fill out your application, attach your resume, transcripts, and a 250-word personal statement at iiit.org/registration, and merit-based scholarships are available.

Thank you all for listening. To stay up to date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, please follow IIIT on Twitter (@iiitfriends) and on Instagram (@iiit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode. More details are coming soon.

If you have any questions for us, or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me. My email is amina@iit.org. As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!