

# VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION

## SPECIAL ONE-ON-ONE EXCLUSIVE DIALOGUE WITH FORUM LEADERSHIP: A CONVERSATION WITH ANWAR IBRAHIM, PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA

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### **Question 1:**

As the Prime Minister of your port country Malaysia, but also as the chair of the ASEAN countries.

First talking about maybe your country, you are one of the fastest growing countries and I think you had many opportunities to explain to the people your economic objectives.

I want to hear about you wish of propelling Malaysia into the intelligent age. I think you have made special efforts really to secure leadership in some way in the digital field and some new agreement also with Singapore, your efforts for semiconductors industry. How do you see Malaysia as a future player in this area?

**Answer:**

I think it was job, you know, you gave that vision 30-40 years ago, although they didn't mention AI at that time, but you made I think this projection. Not all economics have the right projection, but I think you quite an exception because you have been driving this new technology so that we keep up the pace.

I am your student, so we took that seriously. So, once we assume this position, my team then focus on utilizing what we have. We are quite fortunate because the semiconductor, although the back end has been there for the last few decades.

So, both the ecosystem, the ports, airports, the workforce and the supply chain has been minimal. So, we ventured into the higher plan. So now Malaysia together with some of our neighboring countries to become the hub for semiconductor.

Now comes the AI, AI is of course a new challenge. We don't have the expertise know how. So, we are fortunate because of the political stability and the clear policy prescriptions and economic MADANI. We then encourage and provide enough incentives for all the big players are there, mainly cumulatively United States and Europe, including

Infineon, which is very huge investments in that area. Then China coming in, we have to navigate and AI, National AI office, legislation, data protection and whatever it takes to make sure that we are fully equipped. By AI means changing the education system, health services, blockchain exactly. So, it will have to come about and we are pushing it at the pace, at a faster pace. Partly because of my age, I don't have time to wait.

**Question 2:**

Such the reason, Prime Minister, why we call it's intelligent age? It's not just AI, I think it's much more comprehensive and we are entering now assumption from the industrial to the intelligent age. And I think here Malaysia also, which is young population, can play a major role for the semiconductor industry, data centers and so on, you offer this the capabilities of the young generation, but also relatively cheap or energy sources and water sources.

And I don't know whether you want to say one because it was featured in Financial Times, one word related to the special economic zone in your, which is one of the new features of your country.

**Answer:**

Well, this is another unique feature in ASEAN. Well the most peaceful in the world and fastest growing economy. And Professor Schwab, I'm

not exaggerating if I say that I'm yet to see the collaboration, trust and relationship between leaders in ASEAN to me is exceptional. I'm rivaled. We trust one another, we communicate as friends easily and that helps. So, we have first, the energy transition. We of course not just offering cheap energy water, but for data centers. But we see if you come in and you must say AI, you have a set of excellence. So, it must be an added feature.

Then we have the ASEAN Energy Grid from the China, also in China, then Thailand, the Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia to the Philippines and Sarawak undersea cable. That for to fulfil the present requirements of alternative energy, the green energy.

Then we have to work with Singapore closely. And I think this again is unique because not many countries have that sort of arrangement. It's just not a normal economic zone. It's been like a total commitment of both governments to develop this as our centre, both in the interest of Malaysia and Singapore. And it's giving a lot of attention and the support now. Then we work with Indonesia to collaborate in most of our industries together.

You know, in the South Thailand, this one relatively poor area, some problems and we have North Malaya which also relatively poor. So, in my discussion with the Prime Minister and we are now focusing on that development.

So, to me, I'm very excited and it's not me just as assuming Chairmanship of ASEAN, but I think the spirit of collaboration and I should say as pretty called between these leaders is unique and we want to prove.

Now, we realized that with the United States, United States cumulatively as of course, the largest investor to Malaysia. But now growing closeness and investment and trade with China. So it's navigate, it's quite a difficult subject that you answer. Don't ask me that question (*joking*). And then we also know that we had to utilise, for example, the European Union (EU) Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) with UK had been resolved last week with the EU want to have fast track. So that the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), because we are a trading nation, we need to have all the mechanisms in place to be able to attract investment and to facilitate trade.

### **Question 3**

I just want to underline, Prime Minister, we met last time in Laos in October at ASEAN Summit and I can underline what you just said, see high quality of leadership in ASEAN countries. Now, in many ways this is a grouping of we're also still high differences in terms of GDP, development and so on. Can you tell us what are your main objectives for your ASEAN presidency this year?

**Answer:**

I made reference to earlier on the issue of energy, ASEAN Energy GRID. Which is of course towards energy transition and new energy. Also connectivity, because connectivity means it has to be consistent with inclusiveness and sustainability. That means the poorer areas, either within one country or within states will be dealt with.

If we talk about connectivity, then it can be from Vientiane, Laos to Vietnam to Malaysia to Indonesia, we work as one. I mean it, we work as one to digital strategy for the entire region. But we are met me personally, you know, I've endured some sufferings because strong position vis a vis values and the inequality, the gross inequity between the very region, very poor, both in terms of region and in terms of rural heartland and the urban poor.

So, the focus must be their focus system for the region on the trying to raise the floor and commit to raise the ceiling. So, both the floor, the ceiling together is one ASEAN.

**Question 4:**

Prime Minister, you are very well known also to care a very much for human rights sustainability. So, I ask you two questions. The first one

is what let say takes you to sleep at night. If you think of the human rights situation in the world, you have been very outspoken, very engaged. And second, with now the cancellation of the Paris Agreement by the United States, will you maintain your commitment to green development in Malaysia?

**Answer:**

Well first on the issue of human rights, justice, anti-colonization and exploitation Harlow Parlor. It was a slogan in the 70s. I have not forgotten that. I think you should be really consistent. You see, there is trust deficit and there is certainly the issue of deficit in terms of moral, ethical principles in governance. There's one I consider as hypocrisy, politics ambivalence.

But what do we see? So, we will have to have a showcase. Malaysia is a multiracial country. Now we can showcase that we the Muslim majority with strong ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians and the tribal groups in Sabah Sarawak be taken as one great family. Then we show in that manner.

We have a problem in Myanmar. ASEAN has reached these five points consensuses but we are very aggressively engaging with Myanmar now. On the principles which of course cannot ignore issue on human rights. On the issue of climate change, doesn't matter whether this is

Paris accord or international recognition. We have to take measures to save our country and our society. And if it requires us to observe strictly the understanding which is tied to the Paris Agreement, we have to honour. And I think it is not a matter of honouring that we are working at a faster pace. That's why we have the ASEAN Energy GRID. It's a faster pace than what was projected earlier and you can reach that in the next few years. Then of course it's more economic, it's cheaper energy, but it meets the requirements of the Paris Accord.

So, it doesn't matter whether, well it does matter to the world. Unfortunately, that we need rich countries, industrial countries that cost most of the burden to undertake some these measures. What they promised they have not honoured, but we can go complaining, but we have to start doing it. So, you ask me on the issue, human rights, on the climate? Is it because of international understanding? No, it is what is our commitment, our values dictate for the sake of humanity that we undertake bold tough measures beginning from our home.

**Question 5:**

Let me ask you we of course there's a lot of discussion about US, China, rivalry and as a new role as the Global South is playing now in the world. How do you see Malaysia here positioned? You are one of the strong voices actually of the Global South. Do you see Malaysia being a member of the BRICS group or do you want to maintain your



independence? How do you see the direction of the role of Malaysia in this new geopolitical context?

**Answer:**

You in all humanity, so sure you are better qualified to answer that question. My only contribution would say this. We are an emerging economy. We in ASEAN has this principle of centrality. We engage strongly with the United States traditionally. We will continue to do so.

China is an important neighbor, we will do not have problems. Of course, people highlight this South China Sea, the border, but may I remind you that Malaysia is a maritime country. We have excellent relationship with Singapore. We still have border issues with them. We have excellent relations. I treat the Thai as my family members, the leaders, but still have some border issues with them.

So is with Indonesia, with the Philippines. We don't go to war, we don't threaten, we do discuss. We get a bit a little angry and then but we do focus on the economic fundamentals and and move on. And why is it that we must then single out China as an issue? I mean, that's my only contention. Do I have an issue on about it? Yes, but do you have a problem? No. Do we have any undesired tensions?

No. So I think we have to proceed with China because it's important player. They've been very reasonable with us. They take us seriously, more seriously than many of the countries of our old allies and friends.

But as a region, as a country that is fiercely independent mental centrality. We are now engaging much more with EU and we were have been saying the EU now. This is a new group that we have to work together with.

The BRICS, yes, why not? I mean the Global South have to take a stand because the international financial infrastructure through the MAF needs to reform. United Nations need to reform.

We talk about democracy, but we refuse to accept democratic principles and democratic accountability. WTA need to make some adjustments. That's all they were asking for. We're not going to war. We still work under the present mechanisms. So that's why to me BRICS is important. At least there's a mechanism we talk, not a non-zero-sum game.

Malaysia is a trading nation. We survive, we manage as a trading nation and to be as friendly as possible with everyone. But we take our position on issue human rights, issue of justice or issues humanity.

## **Question 6**

I agree that makes you very special, Prime Minister. Now I come back to ASEAN and it's a vision of ASEAN 2025. And my question is, do you want to become a group similar to the European Union with a common currency, with a have internal market? What could you enlighten us how you would see ASEAN in 20 years from now?

### **Answer:**

No, ASEAN leaders are here, so I'm going to be careful (joking). But what consensus have we reached? We have been successful in the past on geopolitical diplomatic, but we realised in my exchanges with all Prime Ministers and Presidents of ASEAN, look, we have to enhance, what the Americans say, enhance the pronunciation is an issue (joking).

Intra ASEAN trade, and work together to complement one another so that there's comparative advantage. So, the economic fundamentals in terms of trade investment to me is important and the way we negotiate with other countries or regions.

But whether we want to then emerge to become like EU is something that we have not explored. Our advantage is to study EU, the successes and the limitations and we are not too concerned about the political setup. We are more concerned about the economic collaboration. From my understanding talking to you, Bongbong Marcos to Prabowo to Picanton or to Thailand and my other neighbours, Lawrence, Tuanku Sultan Brunei, who is most, most senior, the more our main interest is to focus on the economic fundamentals. Whatever it takes, digitalization, AI and energy transition, investments trade. I mean, that has been the focus.

### **Question 7**

Let me concludes this conversation with the question. You have such an experience and you are admired of what you are doing. What would you wish a political leader? What would be the main characteristics of a political leader today? In today's world, which is fast moving, what do you feel? What makes a successful political leader today?

### **Answer:**

I've not been successful, but I've spent more time in jail than outside. So, in the last two years because I've been given the mandate. I think the issue of governance, democratic accountability is important. Leadership to me must set that example. Because countries destroyed

because of arrogance, because of corruption and that is why what I intend to do in Malaysia is first to correct the issue of governance. We inherit some issues, some scandals of the past.

So, we have to be very rigid on that. Which is challenging, particularly when corruption is deemed to be systemic. So tender process must be transparent and effective anti-corruption commission with adequate legislation and adequate powers. And I think that should be a start.

But the humility of leadership, because political leaders by the way, will be given all the praises tend to forget that this is a learning curve and the humility to acknowledge that we have limitations.

What do I know about AI? unless I'm prepared to listen from to the experts? But what is fundamental to my mind, which I will never compromise, is the value dignity of men and women because I experience what unfreedom is of torture in prison or in the lockup. So, I think no one should be and deserves to be treated in that manner.

And, if you talk about dignity of men and women, then their opportunities, the education, the health, the welfare must be given adequate protection. So, this gross inequalities to me, the unbridled capitalism must come to an end as far as Malaysia is concerned. Of course it's generally capitalistic in the system, but then there must not be this issue called oligarchy and cronyism that would destroy the

basic fundamentals, what we mean by freedom and democratic accountability.

## **Closing**

Prime ministers, that's why I personally prefer to talk about entrepreneurialism and not capitalism. I think entrepreneurs and I usually would define it as stakeholder entrepreneurialism, which means, The World Economic Forum coined the motto, I think 40 years ago shortly after I had created the organization which is entrepreneurialism in the global public interest, which means prosperity is driven by entrepreneurs and you need this innovative force of business and industry, but ultimately it always has to serve the global society.

And on this note, I want to thank you for making yourself available for this discussion. I'm looking very much forward to continued success and I'm looking very much forward to seeing you hopefully when you conduct, I think you have two summits, one in May and one in October.

And we wish you on behalf of everybody here, we wish you all the best. Thank you very much.