Introductory Remarks to Presidential Fellows Lecture: Accountability and the Future of Freedom

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Presidential Fellows Lecture,
Anwar Ibrahim, Former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia:
"Accountability and the Future of Freedom"

PAUL WOLFOWITZ: Good morning. I want to thank all of you for joining us and especially those of you who are from Switzerland or from Togo, if any of you are missing the soccer match. And Mr. Ibrahim thank you for being with us. It’s a great pleasure for me to preside over this presidential lecture. It’s another one in a very distinguished series that, over the years, has had speakers here like Bertie Ahern, Prime Minister of Ireland; Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the UN; several Nobel Prize winners; and most recently, Sir Nicholas Stern, our former chief economist and, at the time, Permanent Secretary to His Majesty’s Treasury.

Today I am especially pleased and honored to welcome as our speaker a colleague, a close associate to the World Bank and the development community, and a personal friend, Dr. Anwar Ibrahim.

Anwar is a man of courageous spirit, of deep intellect, and compassion. He’s been an outspoken advocate of tolerance on the international stage, someone who has in his heart a deep desire for a just and peaceful cooperation among the world’s great civilizations. As I think most of you know, Anwar has an impressive history of public service and strong leadership. During his 17 years in the Malaysian government, he served as Minister of Youth and Sports, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Education, and from 1993 to 1998 he was Deputy Prime Minister as well as Minister of Finance. Shortly after he became Finance Minister, Euromoney named him as one of the top four finance ministers of 1993. And three years later Asia Money named him Finance Minister of the year.

Anwar earned great respect worldwide for his principled stand against corruption. He introduced controversial anticorruption legislation and pursued bold economic reforms steering the Malaysian economy during the turbulent years of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and 1998. His prescriptions helped save the Malaysian economy and earned him title of Asian of the Year from Newsweek magazine in 1998.

He’s also well-known to us at the World Bank and the IMF because of the instrumental role that he played as Chairman of the Development Community in 1998 in supporting debt cancellation for Africa and the poorest countries of the world. In today’s dynamic world, where globalization presses changes at the social, economic, and political levels, Anwar has cultivated strong credibility in many areas. He’s been described as one of the forefathers of the Asian renaissance for his passionate commitment to interfaith dialogue and his respect for human dignity.

Over the years, we’ve seen him emerge as a thoughtful commentator on the complex challenges of strengthening relations between government and religious communities, so he brings a special voice on issues of governance to these discussions.
I first came to know of Anwar Ibrahim in 1983. At the time I was a U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia. While visiting Malaysia, I was told about the new, young Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports who had just been brought into government. He was a leading Muslim student activist who had spent 22 months in jail under draconian law left over from the British period, but he was viewed – correctly, I might add – by the government of the time, as a responsible leader with great potential, and he quickly proved himself to be just that.

I believe we first met in 1984 when he had already become Minister of Agriculture; he rose from there to be Minister of Education in 1986. I learned very quickly that Anwar is an individual who’s never reluctant to speak his mind and I’ve come to place a great deal of value on our exchanges. I recall when I met him at a U.S.-ASEAN – I think it was called – Pacific Dialogue in Kuala Lumpur in 1996 and on a public occasion I asked him about his views on Islam and politics and, as part of a long answer, I still remember he told all of us, “I have no use for a country that calls itself Islamic and then denies basic rights to half its population.”

In the rare instances – well, maybe not so rare--in the instances where we’ve disagreed on issues, I always appreciate the knowledge and insight that I gained from our discussions. It’s that kind of passion, intellectual rigor, and sense of purpose that Anwar instilled in public service and in the various leadership positions he’s held, from his early years as a student leader to the time he served as the President of the National Islamic University in Malaysia when he was actively campaigning for a constructive engagement of Muslims in the modern world.

There is no way, in a short introduction, to really do justice to his rich career or his remarkable experience in government, academia and civil society, but even more importantly, Anwar is a man of courage and faith and I couldn’t leave this introduction without mentioning that he was again imprisoned falsely under the same draconian law and it was that courage and faith and the support of his family that brought him through it. I was proud at the time to write in the New York Times along with Senator Sam Nunn and Secretary William Cohen, “Anwar’s combination of religious conviction and executive ability had inspired great hopes for his country’s future.” This is not a time to get in to those politics. It’s a time actually to be grateful to the present government of Malaysia for the statesmanship with which they dealt with the past, so let’s talk about the future. But I do want to say that you and your wife have held your ground through difficult times and emerged stronger and more steadfast in your principles concerning transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

Today, Anwar is the teacher. He has been in Washington for the past year, first at my former residence at SAIS, and currently at Georgetown University as a visiting professor where he is the Distinguished Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Service.

He’s also done some work here for us at the Bank as a consultant working with the World Bank Institute on anticorruption efforts and accountability issues. He’s provided valuable inputs on how we can ensure that our institution is doing everything possible to promote a fair and efficient system of accountability in our day-to-day work.

With all of that, it should come as no surprise that in March he was appointed Honorary President of Accountability, a London-based international organization that promotes accountability for sustainable development.

Please join me in welcoming Anwar Ibrahim (click here for full transcript)