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Malaysia is Back: The Foreign Policy of Anwar Ibrahim

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Malaysia's foreign policy, which will bear significant influence from Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, will have to navigate potentially conflicting issues and interests. [Image](#) from Wikimedia.

SYNOPSIS

*Anwar Ibrahim will seek to restore Malaysia's international reputation. This is likely to involve a more confident assertion of Malaysian foreign policy in relations with Southeast Asian neighbours, non-alignment vis-à-vis the major powers, and diplomacy to enhance solidarity with the Muslim world. However, **DAVID HAN** points out that what Anwar can achieve in foreign policy will be determined by his ability to restore domestic political stability.*

COMMENTARY

Anwar Ibrahim has signalled his ambition to invigorate Malaysia's foreign policy as he settles into his position as the country's 10th prime minister following the 15th Malaysian general election (GE15) in November 2022. Anwar will seek to restore Malaysia's reputation for advocacy on international issues and proactive diplomacy in regional affairs.

This could bring about greater confidence in asserting Malaysia's national interests in foreign affairs, particularly in enhancing diplomacy in multilateral platforms, strengthening bilateral ties in Southeast Asia, propounding non-alignment vis-à-vis the United States and China, and improving relations with the Muslim world. Such an approach, if undergirded by domestic political stability, would be conducive to promoting international trade and investments, which are critical for Malaysia's economic growth.

Aiming to Put Malaysia Back on the Global Stage

The new government's foreign policy will be largely shaped by Anwar himself. Since Malaysia's foreign policy is highly consistent and institutionalised, his approach to foreign affairs will be like that of his predecessors but with his characteristic energy and self-confidence.

Thus, Anwar may seek to demonstrate Malaysia's commitment to regional interests (e.g., through mediation) and Muslim causes to regain his country's international stature and enhance his own domestic standing with the international recognition that he enjoys. This would work towards achieving Anwar's current priority of securing his political position and managing Malaysia's economic challenges.

Zambry Abdul Kadir is the country's new foreign minister. A first-time cabinet minister, he has no foreign policy experience. As Zambry highlighted in [a press conference](#) on his first day of work, various aspects of foreign policy matters, including bilateral relations, would "require in-depth clarification and inspection" from Anwar.

For now, the GE15 manifesto of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition that Anwar leads may offer clues to the new administration's approach to foreign affairs. As it suggests, the government would aim to enhance diplomatic activism in international bodies such as the United Nations, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). These multilateral platforms were arenas where Malaysia had asserted its foreign policy positions in the past.

Bilateral Relations with Southeast Asian Neighbours

Zambry commented in his press conference that relations with ASEAN were highly important and would be prioritised. This comment signals a keenness to strengthen bilateral ties with Malaysia's Southeast Asian neighbours.

For instance, Anwar could leverage his warm personal ties with Indonesia's leaders to improve bilateral atmospherics and economic relations. Nevertheless, bilateral

concerns such as border issues and the rights and protection of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia will take time to be better managed.

[Indonesia President Joko Widodo](#) and [Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei](#) have both publicly expressed optimism that ties with Malaysia would improve under Anwar's leadership. Their statements would have had positive impacts on the image of the Anwar government among Malay-Muslims in Malaysia.

Speculation that Anwar may have an interest in seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict in southern Thailand has already made media headlines. Such a likelihood was traced back to the views that Anwar had expressed in an [interview](#) with a Thai media outlet in 2014.

In response to Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's congratulatory message, Anwar [remarked](#) that Malaysia would build relations with Singapore since both countries were "close neighbours and partners in ASEAN". This remark offers some hope for a deepening of economic cooperation, trade and investment links.

The strengthening of partnerships with other ASEAN member states would not only serve Malaysia's interests but also enhance the centrality of ASEAN in addressing regional challenges. The Anwar government is expected to continue working with like-minded ASEAN neighbours to press for more concrete measures to deal with the Myanmar crisis, especially in restoring rule by a democratically elected civilian government.

Non-Alignment towards the United States and China

Anwar's disposition towards democracy and justice, coupled with his close association with the West, raises the question whether the Anwar government would be pro-West in Malaysia's alignment choices vis-à-vis the US-China divide.

So far, Zambray has made it clear that Malaysia will continue to uphold non-alignment in its foreign policy. Furthermore, the United States is generally unpopular with Malay-Muslims. Thus, to preserve its legitimacy, the Anwar government is likely to avoid coming across as overtly pro-West. Nevertheless, Anwar can still play a role in strengthening Malaysia's comprehensive partnership with the United States, especially in security and defence cooperation, which might be accompanied by deepening trade and investment links.

Likewise, even though Anwar had [remarked](#) soon after taking office that Malaysia's ties with China would be "pivotal" and acknowledged China as an "important neighbour", Malaysia under him is likely to avoid coming across as overtly deferential towards Beijing in order to uphold its non-aligned stance vis-à-vis the United States and China.

Moreover, several issues could compel Malaysia to take a more assertive approach towards China. One challenge is China's increasing assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, notably incursions by Chinese vessels into Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The Xinjiang issue too could be a sensitive matter in bilateral ties, given that in 2018 Anwar was [openly critical](#) of the treatment of Uighurs in China.

Thus, the Anwar government could assert Malaysia's stance on these challenges, albeit tactfully to preserve the highly productive bilateral ties with China, especially in the economic realm.

Anwar's Islamic Diplomacy

Anwar's position on the Xinjiang issue also hints at advocacy for justice in his Islamic diplomacy in the future. For instance, soon after taking office, Anwar thanked two leaders from the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas for their congratulatory messages and [reaffirmed](#) Malaysia's longstanding support for the Palestinian people and their struggle. His response not only highlights his close association with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which spawned Hamas, but also serves to enhance his legitimacy among Malay-Muslims.

The Anwar administration might also engage Middle Eastern countries, particularly the richer Gulf states, to boost economic cooperation in areas such as investments and tourism. However, it remains to be seen whether some of the Gulf states would welcome Anwar's stance. His close association with the Muslim Brotherhood is at odds with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which see the movement as a threat.

In contrast, Anwar may make better headway with Turkey, which supports the Muslim Brotherhood. Anwar has described himself as [a personal and family friend of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#). When Erdogan made a 10-minute phone call to congratulate Anwar during his first press conference as prime minister, the latter commented that Malaysia looked forward to improving ties with Turkey, which ["stood by us as a good brother in difficult times"](#).

Anwar has in recent years commended Turkey as a [modern and progressive Muslim country](#) that could [perform constructive roles in international affairs](#). Such sentiments also suggest that Anwar may have similar ambitions for Malaysia on the global stage.

Foreign Policy Success Contingent on Domestic Political Stability

Overall, the start of Anwar's foreign policy has shown aspirations for elevating Malaysia's stature in regional and global affairs. However, Anwar needs domestic political stability to score in foreign policy. The collapse of the first PH government under Mahathir Mohamad in February 2020, followed by two years of political instability, had compelled Malaysian leaders to focus on internal affairs at the expense of foreign policy. Unless domestic political stability is achieved, Anwar's internationalist ambitions for Malaysia could stall.

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