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**ANWAR IBRAHIM IN POWER:
A HISTORICAL LOCATING OF THE LIMITS FOR
CHANGE IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

The last 25 years in Malaysian political history have circled around the personalities of Mahathir Mohamed and Anwar Ibrahim, with several minor (in hindsight) actors playing supportive—or destructive—roles. Although over 20 years apart in age, they have participated in the same protracted play of twists and turns. How is one to make sense of this turbulent series of events? One rationale offered, after Anwar Ibrahim finally became prime minister in November 2022, is the idea he had implanted into public consciousness since 1998: the painful need for Malaysia to reform itself.

But what nature of reforms? The answers have varied in content and intention, especially given the long timeline between 1998 and 2022. This paper highlights the importance of considering political contingencies over time, both in how they shape the broader narrative of Malaysian history, and how political expediencies impact the prioritisation of reforms. Anwar's hotchpotch Unity Government experiences a strong need to stay in power under fragile political conditions, while retaining its promise to transform governance in the country. In particular, misconceptions about modern nation-building need to be studied and taken seriously.

Introduction – A Four-generational Context for Contemporary Reforms

NATION-BUILDING takes many forms, largely depending on what leaders envision they are creating. Often, their early life experiences with power, position, and wealth shape the specific ethos and pathos that subsequently guide them towards life as a political leader.

This is a general statement more relevant to early leaders of newly-founded countries than to those who come much later. For the later generation of leaders, their careers are defined as much by colonial knowledge and legacies as by the mistakes and achievements of their predecessors. Things get ever more complicated if earlier leaders have not faded away, as the young struggle to take their place.

The political history of Malaysia and the careers of its leaders have often suffered from generational overlaps. This may be due to residual structures of feudal power and traditional understanding of its legitimacy, as well as racially-determined stand-offs in the country's political battles, instilling long-term defensiveness in party politics across the board.

Malaysia came into being in a staggered manner: first as the Federation of Malaya in 1957, and later as the enlarged Federation of Malaysia in 1963. The country's constitution and strong political activism largely reflected the unease and distrust among the various communities and faiths.

While it may be tempting to periodise political eras by leaders' tenure, it would be more cogent and significant to use the wisdom of hindsight to segment a country's history. One should consider the wider socio-economic and socio-political changes the country has gone through, and in the case of smaller countries, the geopolitical developments that have affected them. The long careers of Malaysian politicians make this approach all the more necessary.

In November 2022, 60-year-old Malaysia saw its tenth prime minister sworn into office. This was Anwar Ibrahim. Although he only took the top office after serving 40 years in parliamentary politics, at the grand old age of 75, there are reasons to classify his administration as the advent of the fourth generation of post-Merdeka leaders.

The first three generations

The first would be the founding generation that spans 1957 to 1976, comprising the careers of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, and other key figures such as Khir Johari and Muhammad Ghazali Shafie.¹ Strong foundations for policymaking had been laid by the time

¹ Khir Johari was prominent in the cabinets under Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, holding the portfolios of Education (1957-60), Commerce and Industry (1959-62), Agriculture and Co-operatives (1963-65), and again of

Hussein Onn took over as prime minister in 1976. Domestic and foreign policymaking had been established, providing clear frameworks for future leaders to adhere to.

In this sense, one could take prime ministers Hussein Onn and Mahathir Mohamed and their time in power to denote the second generation of leaders, stretching from 1976 to 2003. Anwar Ibrahim was already a prominent figure, serving as Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the mid-1990s, a period crucial in shaping the political landscape and power dynamics of that era. Other prominent figures of that time were Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Musa Hitam, and Ghafar Baba.²

Mahathir's retirement in 2003 should be considered more a political move to pull the carpet from under the feet of the Reformasi Movement and of his jailed nemesis, Anwar Ibrahim, than a willing conclusion to a colourful and conflict-filled career.

As a developing economy, Malaysia had not yet fully recovered from the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1998—a situation many argue persists to this day. Anwar Ibrahim's defiance against Mahathir, notably his refusal to ride into the political sunset following his dismissal in September 1998, became Mahathir's priority. Out of that turmoil, he strategically appointed Abdullah Badawi as his successor, someone who at worst would pursue his own brand of unthreatening reforms.

As it turned out, the lack of conviction and leadership on Abdullah's part saw him faring badly in the 2008 general election, and being replaced by Najib Razak in 2009. Najib was distinctly overlooked by Mahathir when the latter selected his successor in 2003.

Looking back, the post-Mahathir period was marked by a lack of nation-building conviction and discourse. This era spanned the administrations of Abdullah and Najib, as well as the second Mahathir government from 2018 to 2020 when he had clawed his way back into power with the help of Anwar's oppositional coalition, supposedly to oust Najib. Subsequently, the administrations of Muhyiddin Yassin (2020-2021) and Ismail Sabri (2021-2022) continued the trend.

That period, from 2004 to 2022 spanning Abdullah to Ismail, marked Malaysia's third era of leadership characterised by rampant corruption, a painful absence of nation-building fervour, and the staggered consolidation of political opposition under the headship of Anwar Ibrahim.

Education (1965-69). Ghazalie Shafie was Minister of Information and of Special Functions (1971-74), of Home Affairs (1973-1981), and of Foreign Affairs (1981-84).

² Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah was Minister of Finance (1976-84) and Minister of Trade and Industry (1984-87). Musa Hitam was Mahathir's Deputy Prime Minister from 1981 to 1986. Ghafar Baba succeeded Musa Hitam in that position until he in turn was toppled in 1993 by Anwar Ibrahim.

The fourth generation

This paper explores the following aspects of the Unity Government under Anwar Ibrahim, which came into being at this specific moment in Malaysian history (November 2022): namely, the man's life and career; Malaysian society's relentless struggle with itself; the interplay between nation-building, state-building, and national economy-building; and the nexus between nationalism, regionalism, and globalism with regard to Malaysia's self-perception in the world.

Can the fourth-generation leaders, led by a prominent figure from the second generation in the 1980s and 1990s, innovate a way out of path dependency? In other words, can the country break out of the trajectory that it is on, of rampant racialism in domestic politics which has encouraged corruption, incompetence, and divisiveness on the one hand, and discursive dissociation and non-alignment in foreign policymaking on the other?

It has now been 25 years since the Reformasi Movement first gained public prominence. Can Anwar Ibrahim's administration, coalition builder that he might be, handle the internal strains now when its supporters demand delivery on his promises of change? Or will reforms in Malaysia merely be tweaks made to the Malay agenda *viz.* not to challenge the idea that Malaysia is "Tanah Melayu" (Land of the Malays), but to buy time for it to become an unchallengeable geographic, demographic, and political reality?

More positively, we may ask if this apparent path dependence can be broken, as an addict discards his habit, through a shift in the Malay mindset away from claims to racial and religious superiority towards a more regional outlook on nation building. And can the fourth-generation leaders achieve that, or are they simply laying the groundwork for the next generation to do the hard work?

The Anwar Ibrahim Saga

This paper started out by assuming connections between a person's wish to become a nation-builder and his early understanding and experiencing of power. In Anwar's case, his public image is prominently featured in his 1996 book, *The Asian Renaissance*. Written during perhaps the most optimistic period in his political life, Anwar wished for the world to see him not only as someone appreciative of a contemplative life lived in solitude, but one who had discovered that "a life of contemplation coupled with action and fraternity [to] be even more... invigorating to the mind and the soul".³

The book itself need not concern us too much today except as a reminder of the Asian Values debate encouraged by leaders like Mahathir, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, and Indonesia's Suharto. But

³ Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1996).

it did present Anwar as a prospective prime minister of the country, weaving together subjects found in Malaysian discourses of the day into an exposition to secure his image as a philosophising leader.

The mercy of lesser men

Anwar's enduring relevance to Malaysian nation-building today stems from his experiences since the late 1990s. What we cannot ignore is the political condition of the country today, where the prospects of nation-building are concerned. Did Malaysia lose its way after Mahathir and Anwar fell out in the 1990s? And after Mahathir retired in 2003, was the country left at the mercy of lesser men who lacked deep understanding of nation-building, and certainly not where the multicultural nature of Malaysian society was concerned?

Anwar Ibrahim should have been the man to watch over the last two decades. With the damage wrought by the scandals unveiled during Najib Razak's decade in power, and the weak governments under Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Sabri, the nation-building imperative was sidelined in many important ways. The COVID-19 pandemic did not help either.

Luck smiled on Anwar and his allies following the general election of 2022. The Malaysian King decided for him to sew together a functioning government to run the disheartened country. Anwar grabbed the reins of power eagerly. His skills in getting contesting parties to work together came to good use again. Almost beyond belief, a unity government was formed, involving former enemies like the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. Together with his Pakatan Harapan and the coalitions representing Sabah (Gabungan Rakyat Sabah) and Sarawak (Gabungan Parti Sarawak) respectively, Anwar now nominally commanded a two-thirds majority in parliament.

Anwar becoming prime minister 25 years after being dismissed as deputy prime minister is a saga of shakespearean magnitude. He may be wiser now, but whether he has the energy and retains the conviction to change the trajectory and the fate of the country remains to be seen.

In fact, having sufficient knowledge about what is wrong with the country's governance and self-understanding, not only in light of the last 25 years of directionless development but also the last 60-over years of contentious and divisive nation building, will be key. Just as the so-called status quo evolves over time, so should the reforms imaginable.⁴

As mentioned in passing to this author by a bemused minister in Anwar's present cabinet: "After wanting so hard to be prime minister for 25 years, one would think that Anwar knows what to do now."

⁴ See Ooi Kee Beng, "Rethinking the reform agenda for a new age", *The Edge Malaysia*, 30 May 2024, <https://theedgemaalaysia.com/node/713095>.

This was not mentioned so much in criticism as in acknowledgement of the brown-field nature of politics and how this defuses efforts at transformation, and the objectives of it.

But then, that is indeed the question. Does Anwar know what needs to be done? Can anyone in power, after parrying the intrigues and surviving the betrayals of political life and spending a dozens of years in prison the last 25 years, know what needs to be done?

Politics in Malaysia is to a surprising extent about compromises and theatrics. Managing diversity has its price. Politicians need to stay relevant and remain in the game. Few would know this better than Anwar, who had been jailed three times in his life, and repeatedly humiliated publicly.

Given the complex relations between parties and coalitions, between politicians and the arms of government, between leaders and the business world, between the embedded interests of the bureaucracy and the need for politicians to win the vote of civil servants, how are reforms to be identified, prioritised, and pushed through?

The following sections will examine to a necessarily limited extent the nature of systemic and cultural conservatism, together with political traditionalism, all inherent in the way nation-, state- and national economy-building took place in Malaysia, and consider the prospects for reform.

Racialism as Rationale

The first-generation leaders left the stage quite abruptly, first with the passing of Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Razak in September 1973, and later of Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein in January 1976.⁵

It was the latter who had brought Mahathir back from the political wilderness after the death of Tun Dr Ismail; and by 1976, Mahathir had managed to capture the post of Deputy Prime Minister under Razak's successor, Hussein Onn.

By then, buoyed by his infamy as the author of *The Malay Dilemma*, his dismissal from UMNO by Tunku Abdul Rahman, and the support he had received from Razak, Mahathir had positioned himself for an impactful future as the leader of the country. The political structure of the country had also been radically altered to ease the implementation of the Malay Agenda, articulated within the Second Malaysia Plan, and popularly understood as the New Economic Policy (NEP). Kuala Lumpur had been turned into a federal territory with no state-level voting rights for its population, the Barisan Nasional had morphed out of the crippled Alliance coalition into an UMNO-dominated body, parliamentary debate

⁵ See Ooi Kee Beng, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Life and Time* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing. 2006).

and student involvement in politics had been curtailed, and in effect, oppositional forces now had little space in which to be effective. Challenges to the governing elite would now come only from within.

When Mahathir took over as prime minister in 1981, his major problems were not so much inter-ethnic tensions but the rise of Islamism within the Malay community. Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) had been UMNO's first off-shoot and challenger, formed in 1951 by disaffected UMNO members opposing the ultra-nationalism and excessively secular nature of the party. By the 1980s, Islamism in the country was on the rise, inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and facilitated by socio-economic movements such as Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) that was led by people like Anwar Ibrahim.

In an inspired move, Mahathir co-opted Anwar into his party and his government. By 1982, Anwar was already UMNO Youth Chief. As mentioned by Khoo Boo Teik:

It made better sense for [Anwar] to work with Mahathir towards reform 'from inside' and to use state power to Islamize society as some of his favourite Islamic scholars had advocated. ... In his new political situation, which soon included a seat in Parliament and a position in Mahathir's Cabinet, progress in development superseded the failure of decolonization, and the direction of transformation replaced social criticism as his fresh task for Islam.⁶

Working together within one governing structure from 1981 to 1998, Mahathir and Anwar would have been expected to cover different ideological territories by the 1990s. In short, one could agree with the interpretation that "Mahathir wanted a place in Asia for Malaysia on economic grounds" while "Anwar looked for a position in the world for the *ummah* on civilizational criteria".⁷

The Asian Financial Crisis precipitated the end of Malaysia's most glorious period for nation-building, and of the cogent collaboration between the country's top two leaders. The second era of post-Merdeka leadership ended with stalled economic growth and significant setbacks to the country's efforts at fronting Third World interests. The third era—an uncertain period where nation-building directions are concerned—concluded with four changes in government at the federal level between 2018 and 2022, and, as many hoped, a two-party system for the country.

Mahathir's embitterment over the fall of his economic agenda in the following two decades would be matched only by Anwar's resilience and by his need to give proper meaning to his time in prison by becoming prime minister. This, Anwar has now accomplished. One might venture to say that he is now leading a new generation of leaders—the fourth.

⁶ Khoo Boo Teik, *Anwar Ibrahim. Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2023).

⁷ Khoo Boo Teik, *Anwar Ibrahim. Tenacious in Dissent, Hopeful in Power* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2023), p. 128.

In order to truly vindicate the disappointments he has endured throughout his life, Anwar will need to succeed as a reformist.

But what are the reforms in question? Those which he learned to identify during his time in the Mahathir administration, which boiled down largely to dubious practices related to so-called privatisation, to crony support, and to corruption in general? Those he espoused as an activist in the 1970s, viewed in terms of religious ethics and postcolonial concerns? Those he was enlightened with in the dank jail cells where he spent 12 long years since 1998, which would be of a more formulaic nature or with regard to principles of good governance? Or those presented by his current incumbency as prime minister at the tired age of 75, bound by cautious exercise of “the art of the possible” that politics is supposed to be about?

Already nominally heading a “unity government” and heading a “reformasi” coalition, Anwar as prime minister surprised many with his promotion of “Madani”. This political packaging is an apparent appeal to his own past, to the reasons why he is in politics. The notion of “justice”—*keadilan*—is often reiterated in his speeches, and in the name of his party as well. In that sense, it is hard not to consider him a socialist of some kind, albeit influenced strongly by Islamist rhetoric and residual NEP logic.⁸

At a speech made in Kota Bharu, Kelantan—enemy territory, as it were—Anwar wished for “Madani” to be understood as an aspiration to eradicate hardcore poverty and provide basic amenities and infrastructure. No doubt, measures in that direction would be most easily noticed when carried out in one of the country’s poorest states, and one which had been governed by the rival Islamist PAS.

Rethinking and reprioritising reforms in a new era

Over the decades, the entrenchment of Malay/Bumiputera-centrism as the cornerstone of public discourse, policymaking, and self-identity, interlinked with and enhanced by the propagation of Islamist exceptionalism into a powerful and divisive force, threatens the multicultural nature of Malaysian society. The Barisan Nasional coalition survived on this toxic mix, and in essential ways, the Reformasi as a sustained social movement is directly antagonistic to the long-term effects of Malay exceptionalism in the country.

The endless squabble over race and religion on the peninsula has now resulted in many East Malaysians losing patience with the central government. The nature of Malaysian federalism is under scrutiny, and Indonesia’s plan to relocate its capital to Borneo demands close attention from Putrajaya

⁸ Malay Mail, “PM Anwar: Madani govt firmly committed to resolving people’s issues, hardcore poverty”, *Malay Mail*, 2 May 2024, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/05/02/pm-anwar-madani-govt-firmly-committed-to-resolving-peoples-issues-hardcore-poverty/132140. It should be noted that the term, most commonly translated as “civil”, may have been chosen for its broad scope of use, signifying cultural or civilizational development alongside inclusiveness in governance.

on how this development could impact Sabah and Sarawak economically and as integral components of the Federation.

On top of that, geo-economic developments in the region in recent years have given Malaysia renewed strategic relevance, and this holds much prospect for its government to leverage upon. This is especially poignant where the semiconductor industry in the country is concerned.⁹

A Backlog and Accumulation of Reform Issues

Viewing Anwar's eventful life as a social activist, UMNO leader, opposition leader, and now prime minister—a span of time in the public eye rivalled in Malaysian politics only by Mahathir—affords us the chance to explore the deeper and more dynamic aspects of nation-building in a country whose diversity across numerous fronts often give the impression of being accidental.

Its federalist nature reflects the multiculturalism of its people and citizenry. In a basic sense, Malaysia is a federation of sultanates. It is also a hotchpotch of British colonies and protectorates, lumped strategically into one nation meant to resist communist, if not leftist, politics.

It is essential to consider how such beginnings can limit a country's economic growth and fuel racial and religious tensions, even if there has been relative peace since 1969. Using a lack of violence as the measure for peace would be setting civilisational (or Madani) standards too low. The sentiment that Malaysia is potentially a powder keg remains, and unsatisfactory compromises upon already limiting compromises are more par for the policymaking course than reformists might like to admit.

The ostensible constructing of a system since the 1970s of a classical nation state—Malay nation state in this case—has left deep imprints in many areas. In political discourse, the country is strongly introverted in its concerns, resulting in minimal change in foreign policy direction since the 1970s. The standard of the national education system has been steadily dropping,¹⁰ which over time has affected other functions, for example, professionalism and efficiency in the public service.

The standard of its politicians and the standard of political debate have also suffered over the years. This has great implications for tolerance and patience in the public sphere, and for the health of democracy.

⁹ Mercedes Ruehl, "Malaysia: The surprise winner in the US-China chip wars", *Financial Times*, 11 March 2024, www.ft.com/content/4e0017e8-fb48-4d48-8410-968e3de687bf.

¹⁰ Ngee Derk Tiong, "On the State of Education in Malaysia and What it Means for the Country's Economy", *New Naratif*, 29 February 2024, <https://newnaratif.com/on-the-state-of-education-in-malaysia/>. Malaysia suffers from low labour force participation rate for women (52.7% versus 78.7% for men) and underemployment. Anwar Ibrahim's government is planning to boost women participation to 69% within a decade.

The defensiveness arising from an ethnically exclusive national self-image also contributes to systemic tendencies and dynamics that—for want of a better term—are collectively imagined as “the deep state”. Ethnocentrism has encouraged a “cocooning” and delimiting of public discourses, as much as it has provided legitimation for authorities to prioritise racial aspects in the daily exercise of power.

Immigration rules, for example, are often criticised for being out of step in meeting the needs of government departments such as the Labour Office, Human Resource Ministry, and agencies involved in economic planning. This misalignment also hampers efforts to attract skilled foreigners into the country.

Bureaucrat-technocrat weightage

The reliance on the civil service to offer jobs, especially to members of the Malay/Bumiputera community, along with the privatisation drive undertaken since Mahathir’s time, has also left the governing apparatus at most levels with an overrepresentation of bureaucrats in contrast to technocrats. Governance with weak technocratic input has become a deep problem in the country’s policymaking process, which has yet to be fully analysed.

Given this present condition, having a programme wherewith a healthier balance between technocrats and bureaucrats is regained seems a straightforward way to re-energise the civil service, and raise the quality of policymaking and implementation, and of monitoring and feedback. Accountability cannot possibly be expected or raised unless more technocratic and adaptive means are in place, culturally and systemically.

Reforming the system in the fourth era of leadership in Malaysia is indeed a herculean task. However, to the extent that change is generational, Anwar’s unity government may have a chance, but only if his government is effectively steadfast regarding reforms, and does not allow itself to be absorbed into the inherited network of conservative interests.

Internationalism to the rescue?

The ace up Anwar’s sleeve, challenged as he is by the legacy of racist institutions, religious exclusivism, and systemic conservatism, may lie in the internationalist role that he is prone to play.

There are good reasons why China’s Deng Xiaoping believed his reform agenda had to focus not just on “reforms” but also “opening up”. The first done without the second would not work. The conservative forces in any system needing reforms must almost by definition be already too strong and entrenched, and too comfortable and threatened, to allow themselves to be overwhelmed.

An “opening up” together with “reforms” in the form of a “regionalising” if not “globalising” of broad Malaysian orientation in economic participation, in national definition, and in conceptual

integration, could potentially help Malaysia escape the middle-income trap and adopt a more outward-looking global perspective in its national identity.

In embracing the fact that it was born out of geopolitical contingencies, Malaysia engaging in, and managing such contingencies today may provide it with real opportunities for systemic reform, and not merely tweaks to a failing agenda of ethnocentrism and defensiveness. Notions of the nation, the region, and the world may need to reconnect for effective change to appear.

Beyond all this, however, still lie matters of general nation-building related to developing economies and societies, and which may not have been properly managed in cases like Malaysia. These are generally better understood as modernisation issues, and tend more to do with national economy-building than with nation-building, or even state-building.

Trusting organic solidarity

In relation to the middle-income trap that Malaysia is so often assumed to be stuck in, is the difficult evolution of social cohesion in a modernising society. Here, it appears cogent to introduce a dichotomy coined by Emile Durkheim in his 1893 doctoral thesis, *Division of Labour in Society*, where he understands pre-industrial and pre-urban social cohesion to be “mechanical solidarity”, in contrast to the advent in modern times of “organic solidarity”.

Durkheim highlighted what must necessarily be a radical and painful change in how humans feel solidarity with each other in the modernisation process, involving industrialisation, urbanisation, and professionalism.¹¹

Quoting from Philippe Eynard and Genauto Carvalho de França Filho’s recent study, to ease the explanation of these terms:

Durkheim [analyses] the transformation of solidarity. To this end, he distinguishes two types of solidarity in his demonstration. The first, which he describes as mechanical solidarity, functions by similarity. It refers to traditional societies where individuals are not very different from each other in terms of activity and where there is a great amount of homogeneity between the members who make up a society. The second, described as organic solidarity, characterizes modern societies. It gives everyone a precise social position and a differentiation in the tasks to be performed. This solidarity offers less social control because it empowers its members.¹²

¹¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. W.E. Halls (Free Press, 1984), originally published 1893.

¹² Philippe Eynard and Genauto Carvalho de França Filho, *Solidarity and Organization. Towards New Avenues for Management* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2023).

These concepts are valuable for the contemporary analysis of Malaysian society because they recognise the pervasive defensiveness adopted by the country's policymakers since independence. Preserving traditional mechanical solidarity ignores the organic solidarity required of a diversified modern economy.

As argued elsewhere:

What an urbanising society like Malaysia is faced with is exactly the managing of this difference. Solidarity that is traditionally based on common identity in terms of fundamentals like race, professions, gender, etc., is naturally conservative. Urban modern economic realities, however require policies that accommodate these if it is to achieve not only unity, but solidarity as well.¹³

Conclusion

This paper has considered the career of Anwar Ibrahim within the larger tapestry of Malaysian nation-building within which he has participated since the late 1960s. His time in politics is second in length only to that of Mahathir Mohamed, his erstwhile mentor and long-time nemesis. That tapestry also allows for an exploration of ills entrenched over the decades in the country's *corpus politicum* (body politic). Although these are what largely precipitated the need for reforms as propounded by Anwar since his dismissal from office in 1998 and subsequent imprisonments, they have become elephants in the room, comfortably invisible to most people. Left unnoticed, these limit the efficacy of the 25-year-long reform movement to place the country on a more progressive trajectory towards national growth and regional relevance.

The country needs to shift its discursive focus from “nation-building”, which perpetuates tense identity politics, to “state-building” (meaning citizens’ rights, rule of law, systemic justice, internationalism, and so on) and towards “national economy-building” (centred on concerns of education, economic empowerment of the population, value-adding in global trade, and so on).

For Anwar, fronting the most promising reform movement in Malaysian history, and leading the country at the very end of his long career, real change, it is suggested here, requires the remedying of entrenched ills and embracing the global changes and challenges of the moment.

First, he will need to regionalise Malaysia’s policymaking and political discourse. This may be the only way to break the decades-long debilitating cocooning of public thinking on domestic issues of race and religion. Being chair of ASEAN in 2025 affords Malaysia a good platform for a regionalising agenda at a time of global supply chain shifts and of tensions between the big powers.

¹³ Ooi Kee Beng, “Guidelines for Reform and Unity in Malaysia: Technocracy, Regionality and Solidarity”, *The Edge Malaysia*, 29 April 2024, <https://theedgemaalaysia.com/node/709686>.

Second, not only will he have to fight corruption, Anwar will need to nurture the healthy parts of the civil service and reform the rest. Governance since the 1980s has increasingly focused on bureaucratic processes rather than technocratic or expertise-based endeavours. This has been responsible for the growing incompetence, unaccountability, and lack of transparency in government-citizen relations.¹⁴

Third, the country has succeeded in many ways to industrialise, urbanise, and educate its people, fostering a society increasingly bound by processes of organic solidarity. However, the modus operandi of political parties and the tenor of political discourses continue to exhibit arguments and sentiments that stemmed from a time when the sense of togetherness within society hinged on similarity in economic function and role. This has prompted the need to insert Durkheim's concepts on mechanical solidarity versus organic solidarity into the equation as the country struggles to develop a self-identifying narrative that is not immediately divisive, conservative, and introverted.

As a final point, reform initiatives that are narrow run the risk of being mere tweaks on the bigger unchanging picture of stalled national economy-building, of bigoted nationalism, and gradual decay of state institutions.

¹⁴ Distinguishing bureaucrats from technocrats is an effort complicated by the inherited discussion in western literature contrasting democracy with technocracy. The point being made here in this article is about governance and civil service competence after long-term privatisation of government carried out in the 1980s and 1990s. While civil servants may generally be titled "bureaucrats", the need for experts and professionals within government remains a prerogative ignored by right-wing fervour for privatisation. See W.H.G. Armytage, "Studies in Social History", in *The Rise of the Technocrats. A Social History* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010 [1965]).

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