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No. 079/2024 dated 3 October 2024

Malaysia's Bid for Membership of BRICS: Optimism and Uncertainties

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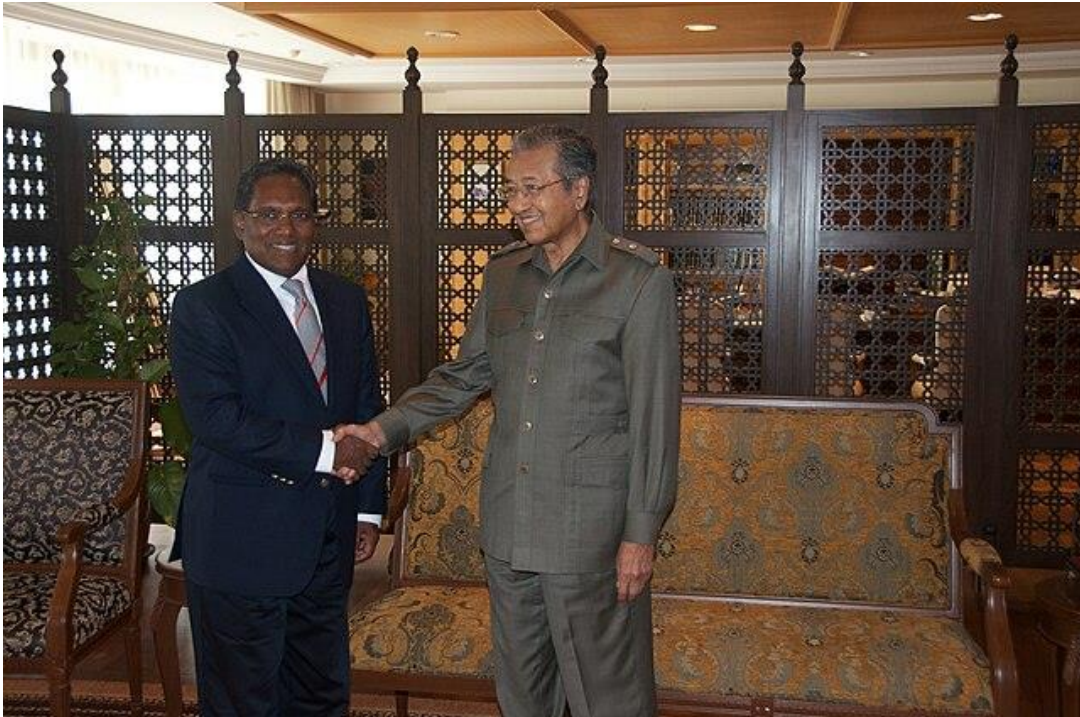
SYNOPSIS

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's push for Malaysia to attain membership of BRICS, the informal grouping of emerging powers, could elevate his country's international standing. However, the optimism of joining BRICS is tempered by uncertainties, especially regarding the economic benefits of BRICS membership, its potential impact on Malaysia's non-aligned policy, and even whether admission into the bloc is guaranteed.

COMMENTARY

On 16 June 2024, the Shanghai-based media outlet *Guancha* released a video interview in which Malaysian prime minister Anwar Ibrahim reportedly mentioned that a [decision](#) had been made for Malaysia to seek membership of BRICS, the informal grouping of emerging powers founded by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Subsequently, during the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Malaysia and China from 18 to 20 June 2024, Anwar spoke with Chinese premier Li Qiang to gain China's support for Malaysia's bid to join BRICS.

Although Malaysia could enhance its international standing by joining BRICS, attaining BRICS membership is fraught with uncertainties. Specifically, the potential economic benefits of joining BRICS remains a moot point. Moreover, membership in the bloc could be incompatible with Malaysia's non-aligned policy. Finally, admission into BRICS is neither guaranteed nor will it be quick despite support from China and Russia.



Former Prime Minister Mahatir with President Waheed of the Maldives: can membership in BRICS restore Malaysia's standing amongst the Global South? *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Enhancing Malaysia's International Standing

Anwar's push for Malaysia to join BRICS reflects a key objective of his foreign policy, namely, to bolster Malaysia's international stature through multilateral diplomacy. Membership of BRICS could contribute to restoring Malaysia's respected voice on international affairs, which had diminished since the fall of the Najib Razak government in May 2018.

Moreover, potential membership of BRICS could reinforce Malaysia's long-standing advocacy of the Global South, which can be traced back to the first Mahathir Mohamad administration. Anwar reportedly [articulated](#) in the *Guancha* interview that "the West wants to control the discourse in the world, but we can no longer accept it because they are no longer a colonial power and independent countries should be free to express themselves ... The world is no longer unipolar, and the rise of BRICS and China has offered a glimmer of hope that there are checks and balances in the world."

Anwar's views appear to align with those of BRICS. Indeed, BRICS aims to offer an alternative platform to the Western-led liberal international order.

Additionally, in the *Guancha* interview, Anwar touted Malaysia's geographical location along the Malacca straits, which is a key shipping route linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as having strategic value for BRICS. This positioning also alludes to Malaysia's role as a key member state of ASEAN with significant influence in regional affairs.

Hence, when Malaysia becomes the ASEAN chair in 2025, the Anwar administration

is likely to capitalise on potential BRICS membership to position Malaysia as an important conduit to foster multilateral cooperation between ASEAN and BRICS.

Would Economic Benefits Materialise?

With the push for membership of BRICS, there have been optimistic forecasts on the potential economic benefits for Malaysia. Specifically, BRICS could [create significant opportunities and markets](#) for Malaysian goods and services, given that the combined economic strength of BRICS members stands at 28% of global GDP.

However, it is still too early to tell whether the economic benefits of joining the bloc would materialise. BRICS remains an informal and loose coalition that has yet to demonstrate itself as an economic bloc with concrete objectives and outputs. Thus, the idea of leveraging BRICS for economic gains for Malaysia remains a moot point. It could even be argued that Malaysia could develop closer economic cooperation and trade ties with the member countries of BRICS without membership of the bloc in the first place.

Potential Incompatibility with Malaysia's Non-Aligned Policy

Also, the Anwar government has had to cope with concerns that membership of BRICS could potentially be incompatible with Malaysia's non-aligned policy. During a parliamentary session on 27 June 2024, opposition MP Wan Fayshal noted that Malaysia had yet to accept Russia's invitation for Anwar to visit country and seek its support to join BRICS since Russia is the chair of BRICS in 2024. Foreign minister Mohamad Hasan replied that Malaysia wants to be a "[middle state and not be seen as leaning towards any side](#)" so as to avoid getting entangled in geopolitical tensions.

However, the Anwar government subsequently [reversed its initial hesitance in engaging Russia](#). In early September 2024, Anwar made his first visit to Russia to attend the Eastern Economic Forum and meet Russian president Vladimir Putin not only to improve bilateral relations but also to seek Russian support for Malaysia's bid to join BRICS.

Anwar would have calculated that potential membership of BRICS could reinforce the perception that Malaysia has been drawing closer to China under his leadership. The significant upswing in bilateral ties due to Anwar's prioritisation of relations with China has created the context for this perception.

Malaysia has certainly not deviated significantly from non-alignment. However, as China and Russia are the two major powers that have been steering BRICS to offer an alternative to the Western-led liberal international order, it may be difficult to avoid the impression that Malaysia's potential membership of BRICS could entail closer proximity to the orbit of China and Russia amid ongoing strains in Malaysia's relations with the United States.

Membership: Neither Guaranteed nor Quick

Despite China and Russia's support for Malaysia's bid to enter BRICS, there is no

guarantee that BRICS membership for Malaysia will happen anytime soon as obstacles remain.

China seems to have welcomed Malaysia's interest in BRICS. In regard to Malaysia's application to join the grouping, Lin Jian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, reportedly [stated](#) on 29 July 2024 that "China welcomes the participation of a bigger number of partners in cooperation within BRICS so that we could act together to encourage the development of a fairer and more reasonable international order."

Russia has adopted a stance similar to China's. Indeed, when Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, met Anwar during a visit to Malaysia in late July 2024, he assured Anwar of [Russia's support](#) for Malaysia's bid to join BRICS.

However, a month earlier, during a meeting with the speaker of Belarus' upper house of parliament in Minsk, Lavrov noted that BRICS nations had decided to [pause the admission of new members](#), adding that BRICS would work with "categories of partner countries as stages ahead of a full-fledged membership" and "support ... like-minded nations".

As BRICS has expanded to 10 members and remains an informal grouping of countries with diverse interests, the halt in admitting new members could be a means to prevent [internal instability](#) and [incoherence arising from rapid expansion](#). This decision could mean that Malaysia's eventual entry into BRICS would not only be conducted in stages but may also depend on whether Malaysia's strategic value and interests are congruent with the aims of BRICS.

Conclusion

If Malaysia succeeds in joining BRICS, it would be a significant opportunity for the Anwar government to strengthen Malaysia's international standing by becoming a prominent voice for the Global South. However, it remains to be seen whether the expected gains of participating in BRICS would materialise, given the uncertainties surrounding the economic benefits of BRICS membership, the ramifications of membership for Malaysia's non-aligned policy, and even admission into the organisation.

Even so, the optimism of becoming a member of BRICS may have been strengthened by Putin's invitation for Anwar to attend the BRICS summit this October in Kazan, Russia. The invitation and Anwar's eventual attendance will be a boost for his aspirations towards BRICS membership.

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