



Anwar Ibrahim: The Pleasure and Peril of Flying Solo

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By Ariel Tan

SYNOPSIS

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's personalised and presidential approach risks undermining his core reformist coalition, Pakatan Harapan.

COMMENTARY

PM Anwar opened the year announcing on 5 January a slew of political reforms to be tabled in parliament, including a 10-year two-term limit for Malaysian prime ministers, the separation of the offices of the Attorney-General and the Public Prosecutor, an Ombudsman office to address public complaints and a Freedom of Information bill. These were long promised by his reformist party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and coalition partners, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Amanah. Handouts and tax relief for SMEs were also announced to address affordability concerns and rising business costs.

Since taking office in 2022, with a unity government that includes the corruption-tainted United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Anwar has maintained a supermajority in parliament and is set to complete a full five-year term. He has also run a highly personalised prime ministership with maximum political and policy flexibility that deprioritised Harapan's reform agenda.

Harapan supporters have grown cynical about Anwar's commitment to easing their economic pressures, political reform, and anti-corruption efforts, believing that he prioritises his political survival through elite bargaining with other parties.

But after a clear rejection of Harapan in the Sabah state elections last November, and public demands for reforms by DAP leaders, Anwar is now forced to focus on

Harapan supporters' demands as he seeks a second term, with the next general election due by early 2028.

Successes and Challenges

With political stability, the country's FDI and external trade figures, tourism arrivals, stock market indices, and the ringgit's exchange rates are generally trending up. Anwar led a successful ASEAN chairmanship and proactive foreign policy that raised Malaysia's international profile and contributed to regional peace.

While the upper classes of Malaysian society appreciate this brighter outlook, the working class and the youth are more affected by stagnant wages and rising living costs despite enjoying more subsidies and handouts. Bankruptcy among under-30 Malaysians has spiked. Small businesses have soured on Anwar's tax reforms and subsidy rationalisation.

Recent cases of controversial raids on alleged LGBT activities and fatal police actions against suspected criminals and detainees are reminiscent of controversial law enforcement overreach that PKR and DAP had condemned while in opposition.

Indeed, Anwar is seen as seeking conservative Malay-Muslim support by committing to defend their privileges, cultivating the Malaysian civil service and royalty, and engaging Malay youth in particular, but without much success so far. While he had been critical of Israel and the United States over the war in Gaza, his recent signing of trade agreement with US President Donald Trump in conjunction with the latter's ASEAN Summit visit to Kuala Lumpur, to safeguard Malaysia's exports to the US, rekindled old suspicions perpetuated by Mahathir Mohamad of Anwar's willingness to sell out national interests to the West.

The Personal Prime Minister

Anwar's personality-centric approach and the relative inexperience of Harapan ministers have de-emphasised the role of cabinet and collective government, and left key policies undefended. He had left key cabinet positions unfilled for months before suddenly announcing a major reshuffle where controversial appointments were left unexplained.

Yet, PKR's and DAP's poor showing in the recent Sabah election reflects the limited electoral value of this personality-centric approach. Anwar had led PKR's campaign in Sabah but emerged with only one seat, while DAP was decimated.

DAP immediately set a six-month timeline for Anwar to implement reforms, essentially blaming him for the lack of progress in reassuring voters, despite being a key member of his coalition government with a number of DAP leaders in the cabinet.

Similarly, UMNO leaders in the cabinet were largely silent on the US-Malaysia trade deal in October 2025, amidst heavy public criticism. It was only when UMNO Vice President Johari Abdul Ghani took up the post as the new minister for investment,

trade and industry in December that he announced a review of the agreement's terms.

PKR and DAP

Anwar's support for his daughter, Nurul Izzah, over his deputy, Rafizi Ramli, in the PKR party election drew criticism of nepotism and power consolidation, worsening divisions in the party. Rafizi is now a formidable critic of the government's failure to implement reforms. On the ground, party grassroots have lost their zeal in pushing PKR's reformist talking points and seem demoralised.

In Sabah, PKR's and DAP's poor showing could be attributed to unhappiness with Anwar's support of Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) leaders implicated in a corruption scandal, his equivocal statements on Sabah's historic claims to 40 per cent of its revenue, and the non-delivery of reform promises.

The Structural Context

The hung parliament resulting from the 2022 general election was resolved by Anwar when he cobbled together a parliamentary majority with parties of disparate approaches to governance, ranging from DAP to UMNO and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS).

The unifying factor for the parties in Anwar's unity government was and remains their agreement for Anwar to be prime minister. There is no clear ideological coherence. In fact, he has seemingly been cultivating Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), indicating an openness to having PAS join his unity government, despite its antagonism towards DAP.

At the same time, Anwar is not known to have engaged the opposition to find a compromise on tough issues such as reintroducing the Goods and Services Tax. In contrast, the embattled then PM Ismail Sabri from UMNO signed a confidence-and-supply agreement with the opposition and pushed through key reforms, but his administration was short-lived.

An alternative path not pursued would have been for the disparate parties forming the ruling coalition to negotiate and present to the public a clear list of policy priorities, making that the *raison d'être* of the unity government. This might well be attempted after the next general election.

New Fragmentation

A personally unifying prime minister has arguably been necessitated by the ramifications of UMNO's 2018 defeat and the resulting power and political fragmentation. Anwar has been far more successful in holding his coalition together compared to his recent predecessors, Dr Mahathir Mohamad (2018-2020), Muhyiddin Yassin (2020-2021), and Ismail Sabri (2021-2022).

Malaysia is a federation with a highly centralised federal government previously held together by a dominant UMNO and supported by a Malay-majority civil service. UMNO/BN's rule tamped down state particularism wherever it was dominant, namely, in all the states save Sarawak and Kelantan. Sabahans now aspire to Sarawak's agency.

State autonomy had been shrewdly developed by Sarawak leaders for decades and vocally expressed since 2018, when they quickly left Barisan Nasional and formed GPS. They had already been holding their state elections separately from the country's general election. Other states have now followed.

State nationalism can be expected to grow. The Kedah Mentri Besar has raised historic claims over Penang. Penang and Johor chafe at the amount of revenue they send to support the federal government.

Claims over oil and gas revenue by East Malaysian states, as well as by Kelantan and Terengganu, will increase. Policy wrangling over resources such as rare-earth mining and refining will surface more and more.

All this will require adroit leadership to manage, but it also affords new avenues for political experimentation and cultivation, as well as closer voter scrutiny of local governance and service delivery.

For instance, DAP in Penang may thrive even if it does poorly in Sarawak and elsewhere. The trend of parties forming different coalitions at the state and federal levels might grow. Greater focus on state development and local needs may ease national tensions over race and religion, although communal relations in multiracial societies would always need careful management.

Some who view PAS' takeover of the federal government as inevitable hope that it would focus its Islamist agenda on its strongholds in the Northern states while acknowledging the more multiracial and inclusive imperatives in the Southern states like Johor and Negeri Sembilan, and East Malaysia – at least at first.

Conclusion

Having courted the prime minister's position for decades, Anwar is a natural improviser. Given the recent signals of voter discontent and the upcoming Melaka, Johor and Sarawak state elections, he would need all his political ingenuity and guile to pivot back as a reformist. Civil society groups have called for close scrutiny of how the recently announced reforms would be implemented and to check efforts to retain executive power over key appointments.

Anwar sometimes comes across as a confident prime minister leading a dominant UMNO/BN government, as if the decades since his sacking from UMNO in 1998 had been a mere dream. But there is unlikely to be such a dominant party in the near future, and thus the prime minister's role has had to evolve.

While personality is important in Malaysian politics, the country is a parliamentary democracy and the prime minister leads the government with the support of the majority in the legislature. Political parties and a coalition of like-minded parliamentarians are therefore essential for the success of a serving prime minister and incumbent government.

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