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## **The Anwar Administration: Once More with Less Feeling, More Art**

*By Ariel Tan*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The pragmatic Anwar administration has a good chance of going full term, despite its low Malay support in the 2022 general election.*

### **COMMENTARY**

In Kuala Lumpur, there is a nascent sense of recovery from the last three years of political turmoil. The Anwar administration, essentially the second Pakatan Harapan (PH) government, with 148 seats out of 222 in parliament, has a good chance of going full term.

Chastened by PH's collapse in 2020, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his colleagues are more cautious and cohesive. Anwar has brought along PH's erstwhile adversaries, the Barisan Nasional led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (30 seats) and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) led by Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) president Abang Zohari Openg (23 seats) to form a "unity government".

However, despite holding the most seats (82) after the 15th general election (GE15), PH remains hobbled by its Achilles' heel – anaemic Malay support that has fallen to below 15 per cent. The opposition is targeting Malay voters to topple Anwar's government.

Thus, the unease and deeply divided sentiment towards the government of the day, particularly since GE14, have not lifted. Analysts and politicians who are focused on Malay ground sentiment and the less prosperous pockets of the country continue to express a sense of foreboding.

## **Potential Gamechangers**

Two Malay-based parties Bersatu and the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), with a combined 74 seats, lead the opposition bloc, Perikatan Nasional (PN).

PN, led by Muhyiddin Yassin, has been promoting an atmosphere of conflict, contingency and crisis around the government, leveraging the latter's early fumbling and bad luck in racial and inter-religious relations, and even diplomacy. But it is far short of the necessary parliamentary majority.

One potential gamechanger is the upcoming six state elections – spanning PN-controlled Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah, and PH-controlled Selangor, Penang and Negeri Sembilan – taking place by August 2023. PN and PH are expected to retain their respective states, although Negeri Sembilan and Terengganu are not sure wins.

UMNO will likely lose more seats in the Malay-majority areas. Zahid's leadership of UMNO and his decision to partner with the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), which is part of Anwar's PH coalition, are unpopular with UMNO's base. UMNO will need to ensure a smoother flow of resources to the ground to sway its restless supporters.

In the unlikely scenario that UMNO is wiped out, pressure will mount for it to withdraw its support of the PH coalition and unity government. Some UMNO MPs might defy Zahid in supporting an opposition leader thereby testing the anti-hopping law recently instituted, triggering others to follow.

UMNO/BN's departure would see Anwar with 118 seats; GPS or the other allies would still have to abandon him, leaving him with fewer than 111 seats and triggering his fall.

The other possible gamechanger would be economic recession and rapidly rising costs of living. If undermined by other governance failures, PH's coalition partners may jump ship, in fear of losing the next election and enticed by PN and its lucrative offers.

## **Why this Administration is Likely to Survive**

*First*, Anwar is focused on cultivating the Malay Muslim ground, which is at the heart of his legitimacy as PM, although this will take time.

He is assiduously cultivating the key Malay institutions. He had shrewdly agreed to the king's proposal to form a unity government to avert a hung parliament, in contrast to PN President Muhyiddin Yassin's striking public rejection of the proposal. He has worked hard to cultivate all the rulers. While the Selangor sultan is believed to remain cool towards him, the mercurial Johor sultan recently praised Anwar for being helpful and considerate towards his development proposals for Johor, more than any previous prime minister had been. Anwar's public complaisance towards the rulers would differentiate him from Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin, and PAS president Hadi Awang.

Anwar has so far avoided instituting major policy and personnel changes that could embarrass the public service, instead acknowledging its importance for his administration's success. Nevertheless, he has quietly reassigned a few senior civil

servants. He has expressed support for an independent body to investigate alleged misconduct involving enforcement agencies and directed the attorney-general to review the proposal. He has also stated that the service needs to recover its reputation, implement an effective tender process to cut corruption, while setting aside their demands for a pay rise for the time being.

Anwar has appointed UMNO leader Azalina Othman as Minister for Law and Institutional Reform, who is spearheading reform bills including that to abolish the mandatory death penalty. These reforms are welcomed by civil society, which largely supports PH. Any other PH leader in her shoes might have faced a pushback, as some reforms may appear to touch on conservative Malay interests and sentiments.

Anwar has also handled UMNO carefully, as the party has been a key pillar of Malay public life for more than 60 years. While Zahid is controversial, Anwar has made him a deputy prime minister, and given UMNO more government positions than its numbers justify. He has visited the UMNO headquarters in a choreographed homecoming and even installed the secretariat of his unity government there. Further saving UMNO's face, Anwar has given lower profile positions to his closer ally, the DAP, which has long been demonised by UMNO.

Anwar's well-covered mosque visits, and the government's announcements of support for lower income Malays, such as financial support for Haj pilgrims and budget meal sets – "Menu Rahmah", sponsored by the private sector – are derided by detractors, but do serve to reach out to the Malays, who are part of UMNO's base.

On matters concerning Islam and religion, where possible, Anwar is likely to delegate them to the states, deferring to the state rulers as heads of Islam, even if this disappoints his supporters. In contrast, some PAS leaders hold the view that secular institutions are subordinate to Islamic scholars.

*Second*, Anwar has assiduously cultivated other key political players. He reportedly briefs GPS chief and Sarawak Premier Abang Jo on relevant policy decisions regularly and has appointed GPS' Fadillah Yusof as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Plantation and Commodities. Nevertheless, one can never rule out the opposition's ability to make a bigger offer to GPS.

While PH's supporters may hope for faster inclusive reforms and better governance, they are circumspect after the last three years of conservative Malay-dominant administrations.

A key disciplining factor for them has been PAS' emergence as the largest party in parliament with 43 seats, with a potential for further growth. The Malay rulers, rival institutions, women, and other voters of various races, religions (including the Christians of East Malaysia) who want a more moderate and cosmopolitan society and business environment, may seek to keep PAS at bay.

*Third*, Anwar is a more ruthless and artful politician, buttressed by a larger political party vehicle and levers of government, than anyone else on the scene today.

His peer nemeses are on the decline (Mahathir) or constrained (Najib Razak and

Muhyiddin). While his party deputy, Rafizi Ramli, is popular and may be keen to succeed him, he would have to bide his time. Anwar has given Rafizi the small economy ministry, while keeping the finance ministry for himself.

For GE15, Anwar had energetically campaigned across the country, despite others from PH reportedly abandoning hopes of winning. He has eliminated party “traitors” and imposed a more unified party and coalition under his command for the first time in more than a decade. Given his long political history and relationships with politicians from both sides, and willingness to give deep compromises and inducements, he was able to bring together apparently implacable enemies from BN, PH and the East Malaysian parties.

Anwar is reportedly keen on serving two terms. He has made a play for mainstream conservative voters who are tired of political uncertainty, by signalling that he wants a strong government to stabilise the economy and to attract foreign investments, and will deploy law enforcement agencies if necessary. Those nostalgic for such a polity as was the case under Barisan Nasional, might be persuaded to go along should Anwar deliver on substance rather than just rhetoric.

## **Conclusion**

There is scope for political reforms that do not impinge on Malay privileges or Anwar’s political interests, including a two-term limit for the prime minister and greater transparency on political financing. Improving governance on infrastructure, health and financial security may help Anwar to solidify his base and garner more public support.

PAS is resurgent. But this has also evoked concerns within certain quarters (e.g., East Malaysian parties) whose support is critical for any federal government. PN also lacks a well-known national leader as its prime ministerial candidate, should Muhyiddin be ruled out due to the graft investigations he is facing.

However, should this unity government fail to stabilise and restore public confidence, especially in the economy, PAS and Bersatu will seize the chance to take over, and fundamentally reshape the Malaysian polity.

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