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## Performing “Prime Minister” in the Wake of Malaysia’s State Elections

*By Shahril Hamdan*

### SYNOPSIS

*The recent state elections in Malaysia proved disappointing and alarming for the ruling coalition, which had hoped to secure the Malay vote and strengthen its popularity. In the wake of the results, the immediate focus has been on UMNO and its embattled President. But the dismal support among the Malay public – in all the six states – is also disconcerting for Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Evidently, his approach has not worked thus far, but there is time to rectify.*

### COMMENTARY

So much of politics is performance. Often, politicians are cornered into playing up roles already ascribed. As Prime Minister though, one has a lot more agency.

Anwar Ibrahim may not have thought about politics recently in quite this stark way. But in moving on from the disappointing results of the recent state elections, he could do worse than re-examine the role that the public, especially the Malay public, wants him to perform.

### Image-building Exercise

From the get-go, there was a sense that Anwar wanted to come across as a different kind of Malay Prime Minister than what the country was used to lately. Gone were the expensive tailored suits of Najib Razak, the branded prints of Ismail Sabri, or the expensive watches typical of other politicians. In their place are well-curated exhibits of a less ostentatious look, typified by the Prime Minister in loose-fitting baju Melayu and capal (sandals) clocking in to work on his [first day in office](#).

For months, he has kept up this image – not just in wear, but also in actions advertised.

On many Fridays, Anwar made it a point to venture out of the comforts of Putrajaya to pray at different mosques across Malaysia and have lunch at regular eateries nearby. Various evenings were spent with religious scholars where he would give long, unprepared remarks peppered with references to scripture as he narrates questions of justice and leadership in Islam – uploaded onto YouTube.

His supporters point out that this has always been Anwar's style. After all, since his days in opposition, he had always been at home with the philosophical, and revelled in being the understated outsider eschewed by the establishment he helped create in the 1990s.

Be that as it may, it does not change the observation that in office, there has been a certain deliberateness in this entire image-building exercise.

This was the first role Prime Minister Anwar performed for the Malaysian public gallery: the deep-thinking, pan-Malay leader decidedly unimpressed by the charms of office – subtly drawing from a tradition of Malay politics in more innocent yesteryears.

### **Sceptical Malay Public**

The problem is innocence isn't the first word you would use to describe Malaysia's political scene today. Granted, in the first weeks of Anwar's premiership, there was a fleeting phase of collective awe in the novelty. Most will continue to approve of the ostensibly "humble" style. But all novelties wear off, and politicians can enjoy broad, surface-level acceptance without it translating to active political support.

This is the challenge Anwar faces with the Malay public. Their trust of politicians is thin – and Anwar is a politician they have known for a while and have long formed opinions about. They can sense when they are being sold hard on something, suggestive of an enterprise to compensate for a Malay-reputation deficit.

Hence, after all the photo ops, hours spent away from office to be seen with ordinary Malaysians, sessions with scholars, curated displays of friendship with consequential Muslim leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey or Joko Widodo of Indonesia, the Pakatan Harapan–Barisan Nasional "coalition" barely touched 30 per cent of the Malay vote.

### **Aggressive Rhetoric**

The other role that Anwar seemed determined to perform was the perpetual campaigner on the offensive – unleashing thinly veiled attacks on opponents he saw as playing up the race card to mask their corruption and misdeeds in office. The rhetoric has been pointed and relentless, betraying indignation against opponents amorphously [presented as wealthy, corrupt and conspiratorial](#).

An unnamed political leader was even [issued an open ultimatum](#), asked to return allegedly stolen money and property, failing which the PM would ask authorities to investigate, "including going to his house, going to his office, checking his accounts".

One takes such statements of a sitting PM seriously, especially when opponents like

Muhyiddin Yassin are facing actual charges – some of which incidentally have been dismissed in court.

The recent remarks by former PM Mahathir Mohamed describing Anwar's premiership as [dictatorial](#) may be steeped in irony, and more than a tad hyperbolic. But it does paint a picture in the extreme; with apparatuses of state power at his disposal, Anwar was not about to ditch the combative style that defined his years in opposition.

### **Credibility in Question**

Crudely speaking, there was a logic in this approach. In the November 2022 General Election, the opposition Perikatan Nasional had successfully campaigned on their “clean” brand to score success among Malay voters who saw their erstwhile default choice UMNO as corrupt but could not bring themselves to vote Anwar's Pakatan Harapan. Moreover, with UMNO subsequently in bed with Pakatan, the path was clear for Perikatan to step in to be the new ethno-nationalist champion. Hence, on both scores, Perikatan had to be challenged.

Again, the trouble for Anwar is an incredulous public. Perikatan managed to paint the attacks as politically motivated, a task made easier considering that Anwar remains in bed with UMNO President and Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who himself faces court charges and has become the totemic figure of UMNO's troubled image among Malays.

This is not to say that Malays believe the charges against Perikatan leaders are simply a matter of political persecution. As suggested above, they are cynical of the political class. But this same trait informs their scepticism of a Prime Minister painting his opponents as dirty and racist fear-mongers when he is in a coalition government with all sorts – including those he had accused of the same things mere months ago.

### **Economic Stewardship**

Perhaps the role that will serve Anwar best is one he is actually well-suited to play: inspiring, and providing economic direction, to a country that wants to feel good about itself again. At such historically tentative moments, strong economic stewardship presents an alternative appeal to divisive culture wars. And crucially, for Anwar the orator and the well-read “ideas man”, who has beat off his rivals to become PM, such a role is expected and will likely have more credibility and persuasion than the aforementioned performances he has tried.

Indeed, he has sometimes embodied this role, such as when belatedly outlining the “Madani Economic Narrative” for Malaysia just two weeks before the polls, or when announcing that Tesla would establish their regional headquarters in Malaysia. But such rare moments have yet to define Anwar's premiership.

This project – and projection – will require more than speeches or announcements. Tough decisions await. Stewardship means he will be on the hook for implementation of plans. He may have to rethink his Cabinet and trust other politicians whom he delegates tasks to. He may want to listen to younger minds whose ideas may be ever so slightly unfamiliar to his circle of [wiser advisors](#). He may have to take some gambles

on policy, like subsidy reforms. But as the recent state polls indicate, he may yet gain by being more Prime Minister with a plan and less politician with a public relations overdrive or an axe to grind.

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