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## **Race and Religion in Malaysia**

*By Ariel Tan*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The controversy over socks with the word “Allah” on them has aroused discontent and highlighted the divisions within the ruling coalition government in Malaysia. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is expected to manage this latest squabbling although his initial handling of the issue seems to give the political advantage to his detractors.*

### **COMMENTARY**

It has been more than three weeks of anger and recrimination among the public and politicians in the governing coalition after an online post about [KK Super Mart selling socks](#) with the word “Allah” on them went viral.

The company and its owner, Chai Kee Kan, had swiftly apologised online and in person. He and others have since been charged with intentionally wounding religious feelings. Government and opposition leaders, and the Malaysian King, appealed for calm and advised people to allow the law to run its course.

But discontent remains in some Malay-Muslim quarters. The feeling is that the government was slow to act and that not enough was done. Others appreciate Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for urging moderation and not adding fuel to the fire.

The controversy over the socks issue is the latest in recent weeks, highlighting divisions within the Anwar government and Malaysian society on the politics of race and religion. The trend may worsen what is, at best, an ambivalent attitude among Malay voters towards the present government, thereby undermining its political and socio-economic agenda for the coming months.

## One Thing after Another

Other recent controversies ranged from a suggestion by Housing and Local Development Minister Nga Kor Ming to nominate seven [Chinese “new villages”](#) (essentially 1950s internment camps for suspected Chinese communists) in Selangor as a UNESCO World Heritage site, to the sudden demotion of Tourism Malaysia’s director-general Ammar Abd Ghapar by Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Tiong King Sing.

Datuk Seri Tiong’s ministry also gazetted [bak kut teh \(Chinese pork rib soup\)](#), as a national heritage dish, which is taboo to Muslims, while Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek drew adverse reactions when she directed school canteens to remain open for non-Muslims during Ramadan.

PM Anwar’s appeal to Malaysians not to squabble over such issues did not go down well with some Malay voters. They felt that their concerns had been downplayed, and that business and Mr Anwar’s need for non-Malay support were being prioritised.

The Federal Court’s ruling that several Islamic laws in Kelantan state – governed by Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) – were unconstitutional also met with a mixed response, welcomed by some but causing discomfort among others.

## Overheated Tempers

We are almost through Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month, which is followed by Syawal, a month of boisterous gatherings among family, friends and colleagues. Both months are also politically sensitive time periods in Malaysia when issues of religion take on greater emotional resonance. With the country experiencing an [intense heatwave](#), abstinence from food and drink is all the more challenging.

Domestic friction in Malaysia is also occurring against the backdrop of the conflict in Gaza. There is considerable anger in the country over the plight of the Palestinians in [Israel’s war on Hamas](#). Most Malaysians support Mr Anwar’s robust condemnation of Israel and criticism of the United States, but they are also aware that Malaysia has no leverage over both countries.

Malays have therefore actively participated in the boycott against businesses with connections to American and Israeli brands, particularly in the small retail and food and beverage sectors. This has affected Malaysian workers and businesses, including Starbucks’ franchise owner, Berjaya Corp.

PM Anwar’s reticence on the boycott is arguably a rational compromise. Supporting the boycott could raise concerns among American companies, which he is wooing, and impact negatively on local businesses. But the lack of active support has also raised doubts about him among those clamouring for concrete action.

Certainly, Malays and non-Malays are not monolithic groups, and there is a wide variation of interest and views on the latest controversy. In general, however, there is greater acceptance among non-Malays of the Anwar administration’s handling of the matter.

## **Fault Lines in Ruling Coalition**

The recent developments have highlighted the different ideologies and political calculations of the parties in the Anwar unity government.

Being highly attuned to its Malay base, UMNO has backed its Youth chief Akmal Saleh's call for a boycott of KK Super Mart's outlets until they display apology banners nationwide. Leaders from the Malaysian Chinese Association and Chinese-based but multiracial Democratic Action Party (DAP) have opposed the boycott out of concern for their supporters, particularly business owners.

The Prime Minister's Malay-majority multiracial Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the PAS-offshoot Amanah have remained low-key in their response. PKR has urged calm, while condemning actions that insult Islam or any religion.

Notably, PKR central committee member Fahmi Zainol had warned the DAP minister, Mr Nga, against commenting on the matter, after the latter accused Dr Akmal of stirring religious and racial sentiments, violating the so-called "Madani spirit" trumpeted by PM Anwar, which espouses a civil society. Mr Fahmi said the issue was about the sanctity of the word "Allah" and not merely about religious or racial sentiments.

The socks episode reveals the conundrum and frustration of Malay leaders in the ruling coalition, and their need to declare their obligation to Islam above all else. They needed to defend their position with their Malay base, against other parties in the coalition.

While Dr Akmal has been criticised for inciting Malay sentiments, it must be noted that he was tapping into a deep well of dissatisfaction. In fact, he was playing catch-up with other right-wing groups actively stoking the issue.

Dr Akmal declared that the boycott was to serve as a lesson not just to KK Super Mart, but to any party that plays the sensitive 3 R issue – the Malay race, religion (Islam) and royalty. He brushed aside the demand that UMNO go along with the unity government's inclusive approach, saying that the party's principle was to defend Islam, the Malays and the rulers.

This was partly to reassure Malays that UMNO has not forsaken them, despite being a junior partner of the multiracial unity government in which the DAP is the largest component. Further, UMNO's commitment in recent decades is widely understood to be to "Ketuanan Melayu", i.e., Malay domination of Malaysian politics.

From this perspective, the recent moves on *bak kut teh* and Chinese "new villages" are seen as yet more "boundary-testing" by Chinese leaders.

## **Cognitive Dissonance**

Since the formation of the unity government to avoid a hung Parliament in 2022, there has been unresolved cognitive dissonance among members and supporters of UMNO and the Harapan coalition.

In terms of ideology, UMNO could have formed a government with PAS and Bersatu. But UMNO's president chose to work with Mr Anwar and Harapan, partly because they do not threaten UMNO's political base in Malay-majority areas, unlike PAS and Bersatu.

Similarly, for Harapan members, it made no ideological sense for them to work with UMNO, whom they had always campaigned against even in the last general election in 2022. The key reason for cooperation with UMNO was that it provided a path to government with Mr Anwar as PM.

In contrast to UMNO, PAS has urged calm on the socks issue, noting that it had to be handled with the country's multiracial identity in mind. But then, there is no need for a party already on the high ground on religious matters to posture.

Mr Anwar, with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, is not in danger of being unseated over these controversies. However, weak Malay support could erode the government's will and ability to implement its political and fiscal reform agenda. As Malays dominate the public service and electoral structure and form the lower classes that rely more on government transfers, reforms in these areas would affect them most.

Mr Anwar's political identity has evolved over the years – as a Malay studies student activist, Islamist, UMNO bigwig, political prisoner, reformist, and now, prime minister. His success in leading the opposition to break Barisan Nasional's stranglehold over political power is in part due to his ability to bridge disparate players and meld their ideologies into unifying political campaigns. He was able to bring the Islamic party PAS, and the secular multiracial DAP, together in a coalition before they fell out with each other.

But, as PM, Mr Anwar is now judged on his executive decisions and actions. He did not put to bed the socks controversy earlier, allowing it to fester for weeks. He can count on it to dissipate, but his relevance will be questioned.

The Prime Minister of Malaysia has always been the central figure in keeping interracial peace and the sharing of the economic pie. If Mr Anwar wants to operate within the existing political framework, he will have to demonstrate his commitment to Malay interests, even at the cost of some non-Malay support. Alternatively, he could try to cajole Malaysians onto a new path of multiracialism.

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