

# A turning point for Malaysia

By: DERWIN PEREIRA



FINALLY, after a 24-year wait, Anwar Ibrahim has ascended to the premiership of Malaysia. His victory represents a moment of multiracial opportunity for the diverse nation – but only if this moment lasts long enough to become part of the political norm.

Mr Anwar embodies a type of multiracialism – less a model than a vision – that is both liberal and practicable in the realities of the Malaysian political condition. In an essay he wrote last year, he was outright in recognising that “racism in Malaysia is a systemic cultural and political problem, which has been exacerbated by government policies”.

No evasiveness here. He put his finger firmly where it belonged: on racism as a structural problem emerging out of the politics of race and institutionalised in the processes of governance. Few Malay leaders courting the majority vote would have dared to be so honest.

However, he is equally adamant in insisting against “the preponderance of the blame being levelled on Malay leaders, giving the impression that racism is a malady afflicting only the Malay community”.

Racism is “inherent among the other communities as well”. Which it is, even if it is mirror-racism, one that grows out of inherited colonial disposition towards viewing Malay natives as a lesser people who were rescued from their own history through subjection to a foreign power, Britain, and the Asians that it brought into Malaysia to supplement its rule economically and demographically.

This is a historical snapshot of where Malaysia stands today as a multiracial nation. At one extreme lies the concept of Malay supremacy, drama-

tised occasionally by the spectacle of a kris-wielding populist politician and given a more permanent religious edge by a party intent on implementing Islamic sharia law.

At the other extreme lies a Chinese-based party among whose members impressionable and intemperate voices go for the racial jugular, prompting the majority to respond in like spirit. Everyone knows what happens when a minority fights the majority. Racism wins.

That is Anwar’s case. His solution is for both the majority and the minorities to look at the impediments to true multiracialism in Malaysia through historical and sociological lenses, not through religious and racial modes that apply to one community only. It is a wise approach, one that was interrupted when the May 13, 1969 riots destroyed the foundations of the new Malaysian nation that had been laid by its first two prime ministers, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak.

Mahathir Mohamad’s modernising tenure carried Malaysia forward economically, but it entrenched bumiputra privileges in a way that turned them into crutches within the expanding Malaysian economy, to say nothing of that economy’s place in an emerging global sphere.

Anwar’s urbane, cosmopolitan internationalism shows the way forward. He understands that relations among the races have been derived from and structured by colonialism, and that they have been entrenched by the imperatives of race-based politics since independence in 1957. But that

time is over. The dismal performance of the Barisan Nasional coalition, which once sanctified such politics, in this month’s general election suggests that Malaysians are waiting for a new national formula that respects their cultural identities while it creates more economic space for cooperation. Economic cooperation requires political moderation. Anwar signifies the promise of moderation.

Will this model survive? That would depend on the longevity of his government.

That in turn would depend on how well he navigates his way through, not only the numbers in Parliament, but the larger social forces underpinning them. The right-wing Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which makes no secret of its hardline Islamist agenda, was the biggest winner in the election. It emerged with 49 seats, the largest number held by a single party in the 222-strong House. The left-wing Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) won the second largest number of seats, 40. Anwar can do little about PAS, which belongs to a rival coalition, but he should keep a firm familial eye on the DAP, which is a part of his own coalition. Otherwise, PAS would be able to feed off an ascendant DAP’s often in-your-face interventions into politics to consolidate the Malay ground further to its divisive advantage.

The challenge for Anwar is to turn his premiership into a vehicle for new political norms in Malaysia: racial and economic inclusivity, respect for democratic precepts and practices, structural reform, protection of civic

rights, and faith in a common multiracial future.

This is where the turning point for his nation lies. If he succeeds, a government of political unity could turn into a movement for national unity. Malaysia has suffered too long from the seepage of ethnic nationalism into its multiracial fabric. No matter how governments are formed, no matter how long they last, and no matter how unexpectedly they fall, the sepsis has continued. It could continue this way. If Anwar succeeds in uniting his people as much outside Parliament as inside it, Malaysia would have taken an irreversible turn. Politics is, after all, the art of the possible.

---

*The writer is founder and CEO of Pereira International, a Singapore-based political and strategic advisory consulting firm. An award-winning journalist and graduate alumnus of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, he is also a member of the Board of International Councillors at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC. This article reflects the writer’s personal views.*