

'Weak justification' - analysts pan PM's 'elitist democratic reforms' claim

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Analysts have demonstrated little sympathy for Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's claim that radical change will only prompt anger and frustration which is why he is taking his time with reforms.

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng called it a "weak justification", pointing out that the people have waited for reforms long enough.

"If politicians are so afraid of anger and frustration, no real progress can be achieved. Human beings will still be enslaved and women will still be treated unfairly.

"His political revival and his party is based on reform.

"Anwar's fear could actually be the political stability within his fragile coalition. I think the people are ready for real reforms to help improve their lives," he told Malaysiakini.

This came after Anwar told Bloomberg that reforms introduced in many parts of

Europe had failed, and he did not wish to experience the same problems.

“It’s a disaster. You assume that the elites have all the answers without even interacting with the masses. I think this is the basic flaw of the so-called elitist-democratic ideals,” he said.

The premier had campaigned on a platform of reforms and positive changes since he was sacked as Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s deputy in 1998.

Slippery slope

Bersih executive director Ooi Kok Hin questioned why some reforms now appear to be “radical change” for PM Anwar when they were not for opposition leader Anwar.

“For 25 years Anwar has called for electoral reforms and the abolition of draconian weapons such as the Sedition Act - do these appear to be radical to the PM now?

“How about separating the offices of prime minister and finance minister or imposing term limits for the prime minister?

“These were his campaign promises just less than two years ago. Why are they

suddenly 'radical' now?" he asked.

Ooi said this was not the first time Anwar had called out those lamenting the slow pace of reform as "elitist".

"I find this a dangerous slippery slope. He has to cease this narrative to avoid becoming like Mahathir's first administration, which accused some civil society activists of being 'unpatriotic enemies of the state'," Ooi added.

'Promising leader'

National Council of Professors chairperson Shamsul Amri Baharuddin could not resist a jibe, calling Anwar a "promising leader" who has thus far failed to deliver and is full of excuses.

"Anwar is a chameleon, his answers suit the audience he is addressing, irrespective of issues. For this, he is viewed as a smart, suave, and well-informed leader/intellectual/sometimes academic/ustaz of sorts.

"On this occasion, it is true that he has promised to bring reform, but not overnight. Be patient, he will do it - a promise answered by a promise.

"He also has made a string of promises since he became PM, including a promise

to lead Malaysia as PM for a second term. Right now, that's all he is - a promising leader," he told Malaysiakini.

Malaysian Academic Association Congress president Ahmad Ismail said that Anwar must recognise that reforming and transforming are important in line with current or future demands.

"We cannot do it if we don't have content, knowledge, ideas, technical experts, good leaders and leadership alongside the structure of organisations," he said, adding that reform and progress in education, academia, and the fields of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) were sorely needed.

Political scientist Wong Chin Huat also said that Anwar's explanations were not entirely justifiable as there are reforms that the opposition would not oppose.

"For example, not rewarding aides and cronies with lucrative appointments in GLCs. That doesn't even involve changing laws, just political will," he added.

At the same time, Wong opined that it was understandable that the PKR president would opt to be cautious on other fronts where identity politics are involved.

"Maybe the issue here is not being cautious, but him not doing other things to

maintain the balance.

“For example, on the KK Mart issue, charging Umno Youth leader Dr Muhamad Akmal Salleh for sedition would not hold water, so Anwar not doing anything on him is understandable, but why did the police let Molotov cocktail terrorists go scot-free?”

“Is Anwar so held back by political correctness that acts of terrorism can be overlooked if the terrorists use religion as their cover?” asked Wong.

Greater fairness

Wong said that Anwar’s non-Muslim supporters were looking for greater fairness and equality on issues that should not cost a lot nor have too much negative political impact.

“Why is it that only Jakim set up a hotline to report on insults on Islam, but no parallel hotline was set up by the National Unity Department on insults of other faiths and communities, as called for by Tuaran MP Wilfred Madius Tangau?”

He said that with these asymmetries, it was natural for people to ask if Anwar still sees communal interests from a zero-sum game lens.

That is, it is not enough that Anwar must do more for Malay Muslims, he must also not do more for minorities to show his emphasis on the former.

“If this suspicion is true, then the message Anwar subtly sent to Pakatan Harapan supporters, especially the non-Malays and liberals, is ‘sorry because your votes are already in my bag, you are not the priority now. Please understand my circumstances’.

“In a way, Anwar has evoked much cynicism and resentment among his original supporters, perhaps most strongly among Indians who feel being taken for granted or ignored. This erodes the goodwill he enjoys like someone who keeps drawing money from his savings accounts.

“Anwar’s ‘do you have a better alternative’ attitude is also shown in his passive support for (former premier) Najib Abdul Razak’s pardon and home detention by refusing to defend the rule of law,” added Wong.

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