

Should Anwar apologise?
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In a recent interview in The Star, Haris Ibrahim, the initiator behind the People's Parliament, made an intriguing observation. He said that he would like to hear PKR de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim apologise for all his actions (and inactions) during his 16 years in government.

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"My contention is very simple," he says. "Tell this nation, 'I was wrong. I am sorry and I want to work with you', and I think we can move forward."

Haris added that he had been tracking Anwar's public statements for the last few years and he has yet to see him make an unqualified apology to the nation.

The question of whether Anwar should admit and apologise for certain mistakes or wrongdoings is all the more relevant now that there is a serious possibility he might become the next prime minister if his Pakatan Rakyat coalition takes over power.

anwar pc in hong kong 130208Anwar is no angel nor is he a saint. During his time in the upper echelons of the Umno leadership, and especially as deputy prime minister, he was guilty of doing many of the things he now criticises.

His maneuverings to control the media is well-known in journalism circles. He also allowed for undeserved appointments to top positions in public universities. And he also had his fair share of corporate cronies, details of which can be found in KS Jomo's book 'Malaysia's Political Economy'.

While Anwar has, on occasion, bucked the Umno way, for example when he spoke up for Lim Guan Eng over his sedition trial and subsequent prosecution, these instances were few and far between and are vastly outnumbered by the times when he made use of the system rather than go against it.

Anwar has been questioned on his role within the administration time and again after his release from prison. In many of these interviews, most notably on BBC's 'Hardtalk', he was evasive rather than frank and never once did he own up to his mistakes. As long as he refuses to come to terms with his Umno past, this matter will keep cropping up.

An admission and apology will get this monkey off his back and enable him to start off on a clean slate. In the United States, it's not uncommon for politicians to apologise for their actions in the past. For example, many political and even religious leaders have apologised for their actions (and non-actions) during the tumultuous and historic civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Anwar can do the same but we don't think he will. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, he might have the 'George W Bush Syndrome' of not wanting to ever admit to any mistakes, much less wrongdoings. Secondly, he might not want to give ammunition to his enemies in Umno.

Love means not having to say you're sorry

Casting himself as a victim of the system (which he certainly was) rather than someone who was complicit in its actions for a long period of time (which he also was) has not harmed his international reputation. But there are enough people in this country who have a knee-jerk distrust of – and in some cases, disdain for – him. For that reason, he should own up and apologise.

The 'George W Bush Syndrome' - he has to grapple with on his own. We can't help him there. But if he's afraid that Umno will be able to exploit any mea culpa about past mistakes, we believe it's totally possible for him to apologise in such a way that gives nothing to his enemies.

Anwar could say that he was misled, that he was sucked into the system, that it was a shortcoming on his part to succumb to Umno's ways. He could then say that after suffering through six years of jail and experiencing firsthand just how unfair the system is, he is now a truly changed man. He can then vow never to do such things again. Such a move would warm the hearts of the people who still don't trust him, including Haris Ibrahim.

Perhaps the best opportunity for him to do this would be when (or rather, if) he manages to take over the government. It would make sense for him to do so from a position of strength. An admission of guilt, a heartfelt apology, and then the unveiling of a grand vision for the future would be an excellent start for an Anwar administration.

While we believe he probably can topple the current government in due time, we don't think he will ever apologise for past mistakes. Nothing in his public statements or demeanor suggests he will. For Anwar, sorry seems to be the hardest word.

He probably believes that if he makes all the key reforms he has promised – such as dismantling the Internal Security Act, freeing up the media, replacing the New Economic Policy with something more inclusive – it would be enough to secure his legacy. It's said that love means not ever having to say you're sorry. Anwar probably thinks this applies to politics as well.

Anwar may suffer from the 'George W Bush Syndrome' but he also has a 'Nelson Mandela Complex'. If he wants to be seen as the great leader that he potentially could be, it would do well for him to be big-hearted enough to admit that he was wrong in the past and to apologise for his mistakes.