

Can Anwar be trusted?
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Previously, we talked about how PKR
MCPX

de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim has not admitted to – and probably will never admit to – previous mistakes while he was part of the Barisan Nasional government. And as such, he would never apologise for them.

In today's piece, we want to deal with another important and somewhat related matter, which is can he be trusted?

Those who have observed Anwar over the years would probably agree to the following adjectives to describe him – slick, shrewd, cunning. These words do not necessarily have positive connotations and for good reason.

anwar ibrahim pc 120508 04Anwar has often been accused of being a political chameleon – capable of adjusting his messages depending on the audience he's addressing.

He's great at massaging his messages in such a way that you feel he's telling you exactly what you want to hear. A smooth operator.

That doesn't mean that he is inconsistent or hypocritical – Dr Mahathir Mohamad has that market cornered. In fact, he's been very consistent in his policies since his release from prison. Take for example, his stance that the New Economic Policy (NEP) needs to be dismantled and replaced with something more inclusive. Even though he has been criticised by Umno over this matter, he has not relented once.

Two questions are relevant in regard to whether Anwar can be trusted. Firstly, is he a changed man? Secondly, does this even matter?

Is Anwar the Reformasi Man the same political animal as the Anwar the deputy prime minister? We think that having gone through what he has, it would be difficult for him not to have changed as a result.

Anwar went from the pinnacle of political power to the depths of political humiliation. He was charged with abuse of power and committing sodomy. He was beaten up by the then-chief of police. And his name – as well as those around him – was dragged through the mud by the mainstream media. Never before had a Malaysian politician of his stature felt the heavy hand of the state against him in the way Anwar did.

When he was locked up, he didn't wallow in self-pity. He used his time productively to read and to do copious amounts of soul searching. It's hard to imagine that the six years he spent in that cold jail cell failed to change him in some very profound and fundamental ways.

He will not renege on his promises

But even if one is cynical and believes that he has not changed, does it matter provided he

carries out all the reforms he has promised?

anwar ibrahim pc 120508 03There is little doubt in our minds that he would free up the media, abolish the Internal Security Act and reform the Universities and University Colleges Act if he becomes the next PM.

He would also dismantle the NEP and replace it with something better. You can also throw in a Freedom of Information Act to boot. In other words, he would implement all the things that civil society expects him to.

Why are we so confident about that?

Quite simply, because it would be to his strategic advantage to carry out such reforms. In fact, there is only upside and no downside for him to do so. He would be seen as the man who was responsible for 'freeing' up Malaysia and for turning it into a real democracy. He would become the greatest PM Malaysia ever had.

And what if he reneges on his promises – promises that have been widely-publicised domestically and internationally? Think of it this way. If Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi could suffer so badly politically in such a short span of time because of his failure to keep his promises of reform, imagine how much more Anwar would suffer if he didn't live up to expectations.

Many of the young and idealistic people who have joined PKR have done so precisely because they've bought into his progressive vision for the future. These very same people would leave his party in droves if he starts renegeing on his promises. His popular support amongst the masses would dry up and Pakatan Rakyat would disintegrate as his coalition partners desert him.

So, not only do we think he will do all that he has promised to do, we think he will do them in lightning quick fashion. In that sense, he is the antithesis of Abdullah – a glacially slow reformer if there ever was one. Everything about Anwar shows that he can't wait to implement reforms. What is his campaign about, if not reforms?

Now, is this because he truly believes in all these reforms? Or would he implement them for vainglorious reasons – because they are politically popular things to do and he wants a permanent place in the history book?

There's no way to read the hearts of men. We don't know, for example, whether he's absolutely sincere or not when he says that he believes in a free press. But we do know that he has said this on far too many occasions for him to backtrack on it once he comes to power.

At the end of the day, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. If Anwar does deliver on all his reform promises, does it even matter whether he's sincere or trustworthy in the eyes of his critics? What's important is that he implements reforms. And we have every reason to believe he will do that.