

**Anwar's challenge : US policy**  
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At a closed-door dialogue with Anwar Ibrahim a couple of years ago, a question was raised as to whether the wannabe prime minister's US policy would be too friendly to be palatable to many, which had some pro-Washington attendants in the room nervous.

Always a smart player, Anwar referred to China, stating that the world's most populous nation's bilateral relations with the US were based on strong national principles, while not neglecting the sole superpower as an extremely important trading partner to many a developing country, including Malaysia.

"Umno can accuse me of being a sellout, but it makes no sense to be hypocritical and dismiss the mutually beneficial economic co-operation between us and the Americans," he said.

anwar ibrahim pc call for emergency parliament meeting 180908 07To placate his critics, Anwar added that Iraq had been a failure, and it was incumbent on Washington to withdraw its forces from the country and heal the wounds. He even cracked a joke by saying that someone on the CIA's payroll would not usually be bold enough to express his/her negative views on Iraq and Afghanistan.

"But Malaysia must be realistic enough to not sacrifice trade and investments with the US."

Fair enough. Anwar, on that occasion at least, was willing to criticise President George Bush's policy in Iraq, which in his view, was "morally indefensible". He however warned that Umno had been habitual in exploiting US' misdeeds around the globe as a pretext to resist political and democratic reform at home.

Generally, Malay/Muslim Malaysians are more wary of foreign interference, while the Chinese and the Indians are largely neutral on the issue. In fact, many non-Malays believed had Malaysia followed in the footsteps of Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea by knocking on the door of the International Monetary Fund at the height of the financial crisis in 1997/98, the country could have been spared the havoc of having to bail out a host of bankrupt conglomerates with links to Umno and the then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad.

When Anwar sought refuge in the Turkish embassy out of fear he would be arrested over the sodomy claims a few months back, the act did not go down well with the general public, including some left-leaning commentators, who feared that it could set a precedent for other countries to meddle in Malaysia's internal affairs.

Despite the White House's assurance of forging stronger and more equitable partnerships with Asean countries, there are signs of the US interfering in some domestic issues of the region. For one, the Bush administration has expressed its hope that political recommendations made by the White House would be respected in Southeast Asia.

**A political and business renaissance**

Meanwhile, the US has been at the forefront of advocating for Anwar. In July this year, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at an Asean meeting in Singapore sturdily criticised the Barisan Nasional government for taking Anwar into custody, insisting that an open trial with the participation of international human rights organisations was an ideal solution to the political stalemate in Malaysia.

Since then, Anwar has been increasingly presenting himself as an alternative to either Abdullah Ahmad Badawi or Najib Abdul Razak. How he would formulate a concrete policy on the US that would be popular with the Muslim community in Malaysia is worth observing.

Apart from Malaysia, another Southeast Asian country that is central to US policy in this region is, needless to say, Myanmar. This aside, Washington has, time and time again, mentioned the sporadic armed clashes in West Timor, a territory within the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur.

Jakarta is often accused of human rights violations and military oppression that have resulted in frequent kidnappings and even deaths on the part of civilians, and Rice has made clear the US' intention to play a significant role in any future negotiations between West Timor and Jakarta, and reminded the Indonesian government that the bilateral ties between the two countries could be further enhanced if US advice is taken into account.

How much ground would Anwar concede to the US should he manage to assume the highest political office in Malaysia? One litmus test would be his effort to reverse the downward foreign direct investment into the country.

Over the years, US investments in Malaysia have been on the decline, especially in Penang, where the once 'high-tech' industry is now experiencing the agony of transformation.

anti iraq war protest 210305 mind own business While the BN government has reiterated the failure to conclude the US-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement would have no impact on US investments in Malaysia, it cannot be denied that the business community is seriously concerned over the deteriorating investment environment in the country.

Being the biggest investor, the US will remain an obvious as well as attractive choice. A pragmatic Anwar would likely embrace the opportunities offered by the Americans, and a conclusion of the long-delayed FTA could not be ruled out.

Many believe Anwar's ascension to the prime ministership could usher in a political renaissance in a country that has all the potential to be a model democracy in the region, but it would also be likely that all his attempts to forge closer ties with the west, and the US in particular, would be fraught with challenge and cause much backlash.