

A unifying PM is what we need

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New Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has been welcomed by many like a breath of fresh air. But can he cleanse the nation of the many ills it now suffers? It remains to be seen.

MY retired brother called from Penang the other day. He had yet to get his pension and needed some cash. Why? I asked. "Anwar has won and I want to celebrate with my friends," he cheered. He is just one of many who are enamoured of our new Prime Minister.

There is also this man in Bukit Mertajam, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's hometown, who is buying everyone meals at restaurants around town.

Elsewhere, a large non-Muslim crowd gathered outside a mosque as Anwar prayed inside. And they mobbed him when he came out. Everywhere he goes, the PM is being cheered.

He's probably the most welcomed Malaysian chief executive in living memory. It's all quite exciting, but I think the celebrations are also a bit premature.

Yes, it has been a long wait for him, his supporters and those who have been rooting for him all these years. He has been the underdog, facing failure after failure, falling every time he believed he had reached the pinnacle.

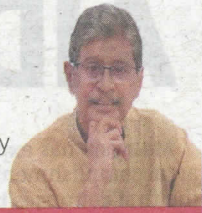
It's the kind of story that would touch any heart.

But it's only the beginning. Now is not the time to put him on a pedestal. He has much to prove, and he could fall off that high horse any time, just as the last three prime ministers did.

The plotting is going on. Those who do not like the idea of him being PM will do their best to bring about his downfall.

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Why not?

It happened before in 2020 with the Sheraton Move; and even days after Anwar's appointment, there was talk of a Tropicana Move.

That has been denied, but his performance will be under intense scrutiny. There will be little room for relaxation.

His first task just got done. He has named his full Cabinet, obviously done with much juggling, putting together a unity government that will keep everyone happy and yet meet his promise of a small Cabinet.

If that was hard, the really herculean task awaits now.

There is so much wrong with our country now – an economy in the doldrums, a ringgit that's floundering, an education system that's well off the mark, and a population that's deeply divided.

There's so much to do – or undo. I say undo because Anwar himself may be responsible for some of those maladies. He was once Education Minister – way back in 1986 – and started a revolution in the system.

He is the man credited with Islamisation of our schools, and the growth of religious schools, while working with then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Those actions have come back to bite him, say analysts. Two weeks ago, his daughter lost the Permatang Pauh seat, held by members of his family since 1980, to a tahfiz teacher.

Anwar, and his Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Abim), were the driving force behind such schools.

The children in many of these schools are being taught to only vote for a certain party, and with Undi18 now law, there was a flood of such voters, the analysts say.

With the mushrooming of religious schools, the days when children of all races laughed, played and mixed in schools seem to be long gone.

Now, schools are divisive. Even the syllabus has been questioned with Malays themselves asking why there are so many religious classes and too few teaching modern-day living skills like English, science and technology, computer know-how and things like that.

The Chinese and Indians are flocking to vernacular schools, leaving the national school system largely to the majority Malays. So many Malays are also migrating to these vernacular schools.

Already, there is a call for one stream of education for all. I think it's too early for that too. We first need to make the national school system the one of choice. For that, a

good Education Minister is needed, as is a revamp of the school syllabus. Fadhina Sidek and Datuk Seri Khaled Noordin have a lot to do.

We have heard the perennial complaints – discrimination in matriculation places, the closure of canteens during Ramadan, children forced to eat in the toilet, and odd corners, non-Muslim children being left to their own devices during agama classes ... the list is long.

Public universities too need to be places where a Malaysian identity can be forged, not where differences are reinforced.

A National Unity Minister who sincerely believes in his job could be a big help. Aaron Ago Dagang, a man from Sarawak, could be the right choice.

There is a lot we can learn from the Borneo states, which have retained much of the old-world charm that places like George Town, Klang, Johor and even Kuala Lumpur once had; the days when Chinese coffee shops housed nasi kandar stalls and people of all races sat together at the same table, eating and drinking together.

Even my mee jawa man had prawn and beef broth for his different clientele, each with a different wok.

Then there's the minister for Religion. We have all heard about the one from Indonesia; his mantra is that he is a minister for all religions – Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism.

It was not so the last time for the minister in Malaysia. He believed his

job was only to cater to the religion of the federation.

What we need is a minister who looks at the similarities among religions, all of which preach peace and unity, not one who considers his religion superior and therefore untenable with the others.

The Rulers have got it right. They have called for an end to all extremism, religious or racist, and for unity to be the main consideration. It is important that the government works towards bringing the bitterness to an end.

"I hope there are no more leaders who will raise racial or religious issues to provoke the people," said Negri Sembilan's Tuanku Muhriz ibni Almarhum Tuanku Munawir.

They also want the Rukun Negara, whose first tenet is "Belief in God". It does not say which religion. The supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law are also important.

Now, it is up to the new PM. He has his job cut out for him. The honeymoon with the voters and adulation of the supporters will be over real soon.

The work – and it's a lot of hard work – will have to begin. The pitfalls and booby traps are many. His supporters have faith that he will make it.

Five years from now – if Anwar succeeds as a unifying PM – we can celebrate as a nation. For now, though, I am holding that champagne, or non-alcoholic beer as the case may be.