



It's just politics

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"WILL Anwar be Prime Minister?" was the most asked question when I was in Bangkok last week. At that time, Pakatan Harapan chairman Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Perikatan Nasional chairman Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin were vying to be Malaysia's 10th prime minister.

I was in Thailand last Thursday to give a talk on "Challenges and Roles for Asian Media" organised by Thai PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), Thai PBS World and Asia News Network (ANN). Journalists from around Asia – including from India, the Philippines and Indonesia – and Thai politicians, including former Thai prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, were keen to know whether the PKR president would finally realise his dream of becoming PM.

Nattha Komolvaldhin, Thai PBS World director who was the talk's moderator, asked me to comment on Malaysian politics in the 15th General Election on behalf of an audience that seemed keen to know more about Malaysian politics.

I told them that, earlier, the King had announced that Anwar was the PM.

I related to them that the day before, a question raised was whether Anwar would be made

Lights, camera, action – on the world's stage

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The global spotlight wouldn't be anything new for Malaysia's 10th Prime Minister.



At ease: Anwar on his first day at the Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya handling congratulatory phone calls from world leaders, some of whom he knows personally. — SADIQ ASYRAF/PMO

PM solely because there are, arguably, only three Malaysian leaders the world knows: Anwar, twice prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (no explanation needed to understand why), and former prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak (for all the wrong reasons).

Not many people were talking about Muhyiddin, who was poised to become PM for a second time.

I told the crowd that Anwar was known worldwide because he craved the international limelight. I covered deputy prime minister and finance minister Anwar when he was Umno deputy president in the late 1990s, and he was an international media darling.

For example, Anwar was on

the cover of the Oct 6, 1997, *Time* magazine under the headline: "Anwar and the Future of Asia: Malaysia's No.2 is the star of a rising generation of leaders, but will Mahathir give him a chance?"

"Now that Anwar is PM, he will consolidate his position and sooner or later step into the international limelight. Now that he is a Malaysian leader, he will want to become a world leader," I said.

"He will want to win a Nobel Prize," I joked. Sort of.

I ended my comment by addressing the Indian, Filipino and Indonesian journalists who were fellow panellists and said, "Watch out, Jokowi, Bong Bong Marcos and Modi, there's a new kid on the world block".

I was referring to Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, Philippines President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Over the next few days, I met up with Bangkok-based journalists who were on a first-name basis with the new Malaysian Prime Minister.

Unlike former prime ministers Muhyiddin or Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, Anwar engages with the international media. For example, in September this year, he gave a talk at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand in Bangkok – "I met Anwar recently in Bangkok," a foreign correspondent told me.

I also met some people who are experts in the southern Thailand conflict that has taken the lives of nearly 7,000 people since 2004.

I'm familiar with the deadly conflict. As ANN editor and Star Media Group Bhd Thailand correspondent based in Bangkok from 2006 to 2010, I visited the region, which comprises Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala provinces, and which runs along Peninsular Malaysia's northern border. The Thai government is battling an unseen enemy seeking "Merdeka" for the Pattani region, which Kelantan used to be a part of. Last month, a police officer was killed and at least 29 people were injured when a car bomb exploded inside a police compound in Narathiwat province.

Malaysia is brokering peace between Bangkok and the insurgents. But nothing much has moved since the peace talks started in 2013 when the "General Consensus on Peace Dialogue Process" pact was signed between Thailand's

National Security Council and the BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional or National Revolutionary Front).

The Malaysian facilitator for the talks is former Malaysian inspector-general of police Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Mohd Noor, who was jailed for two months in 2001 for assaulting Anwar while the former deputy prime minister was in jail in 1998.

"PM Anwar probably will replace Rahim Noor as a facilitator, not because of the punching incident but because the facilitator is inefficient. He sometimes forgets what he has for breakfast, and he's too fierce to be a facilitator," said one of the Thai experts I spoke to.

He said that Anwar was interested in the conflict even when he was an Opposition leader.

"Anwar has a deep understanding of the conflict. And he wanted to bring peace to the region. I won't be surprised that your Prime Minister will expedite bringing peace to the Pattani region," he said.

However, the expert cautioned that the southern Thailand conflict might not have a political solution.

"The Thai government wants the insurgents to accept the Thai Constitution, which means they would have to recognise that Pattani is under the Thai government. But the insurgents want Merdeka, which Bangkok won't allow," he said.

"But never say 'can't' to Anwar as he will take it as a challenge to be the world leader who can bring peace to southern Thailand."

Jokowi, Bong Bong and Modi, you've been warned – Anwar will take his rightful place as an Asian leader.