

Best foot forward

It's all tricky territory for our new PM, but with his cards played right, the future could be bright.

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On the beat

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IT was a three-hour meeting that was broadcasted on Facebook. The gathering of over 300 Islamic scholars, theologians and non-governmental organisation representatives was the first by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim since being appointed Prime Minister.

Anwar, more than anyone else, understands the importance of a sound narrative and optics.

More so when the rival party, PAS, has gained significantly in the recently concluded general election. Talk of a "Green Tsunami" – which saw the Islamist party secure 49 parliamentary seats from the previous 18 in the last general election – has gripped the nation's attention.

Seri Perdana, the official home of the PM, was picked for the unprecedented meeting, dubbed the Mahabbah program, which means "love" in Arabic.

The Parti Keadilan Rakyat president has chosen to stay at his Kajang residence in Selangor, and not the sprawling Seri Perdana.

Anwar knows the importance of polishing his Islamic credentials



Careful balance: Pakatan and Anwar have won the support of many non-Malays but now he may need to fall back on his Islamic and nationalist roots to win over the country's dominant Malay-Muslim population. – Bernama

ahead of the series of state elections in the middle of 2024.

The Perikatan Nasional, via PAS, appears to have the upper hand now, seemingly in control of the conservative Malay votes, and – some say, even the Undi18 youth votes. The political wave has certainly spooked many non-Muslims with PAS' brand of Islam, and if left unchecked, would even have serious implications to how Malaysia is shaped.

Whatever way you look at it, the Pakatan Harapan coalition is perceived as a liberal and multiracial group with little emphasis on Islamic politics, thanks to the effective social media campaigning by PAS. The Islamist party has blatantly dubbed DAP and Christians as the bogeymen, with total disregard

for the sensitivities of other Malaysians. But Anwar can't be breaking into PAS strongholds without using Islam as part of his agenda, too.

He must be careful in balancing his act though, by telling his audience at the Mahabbah program that he would emphasise moderation and the problems facing the Malays "as well as Indians and Orang Asli and the people of Sabah and Sarawak."

He pledged his commitment to "break the culture of corruption" and "support the system of ethics."

In a recent meeting between editors and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the journalists were also told that moderation would be a key component of the PM's agenda.

On Friday, Prof Dr Gamal Farouq

Ad-Daqaq Al-Azahari was invited to speak at Seri Perdana.

The 62-year-old, a distinguished scholar who studied at the prestigious Al-Azhar University, is also an expert in Islamic jurisprudence.

The on-going series of Islamic programmes at Seri Perdana has grabbed the attention of Muslims and has explicitly sent a powerful message that Islam is not the monopoly of PAS leaders, especially its president Tan Sri Abdul Hadi Awang.

Like it or not, the acceptance of prominent overseas Islamic scholars is regarded an endorsement of Anwar.

There will be some who will ask if Anwar is attempting to compete with PAS on the Islamic platform. However, this wouldn't be something new to Anwar because he began as the head of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Abim) or Malaysian Islamic Youth movement in 1971 at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Anwar was the Abim president from 1974-82, and he built the movement into a significant presence in Malaysian politics, so much so, he was even addressed as "Pak Sheikh" by many.

He caught the attention of then PM, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who recruited Anwar into Umno in 1982 to check on PAS, but Anwar carefully built his reformist image, and as a Muslim democrat instead of a hardliner.

He was instrumental in the setting up of the International Islamic University in Gombak, Selangor, where he also served as its president. Fast forward to now, and PH has won the support of the west coast electorate, especially the non-Malays. However, he may now need to fall back on his Islamic and

nationalist roots to win over the country's dominant Malay-Muslim population.

He must re-emphasise his Islamic credentials while parading his international appeal.

While most leaders host their international counterparts privately, Anwar openly displays his meetings with them to the media, or via social media even. The calls that matter to the Muslim world were from renowned theologian Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

He's aware that the PH government can't let PAS control the race and religion narrative.

But neither can he afford to let religion be the focus of his administration as his handling of the economy in the choppy waters of 2023 will consume his time as the PM.

It will be a real test for Anwar leading Malaysia as the first PM from a multi-racial party paired with his brand of politics, which emphasises moderation and Islam.

While speaking at a forum in Indonesia in 1995, Anwar coined the term "Masyarakat Madani" or civil society, which promotes moderation and the basic principles of a plural society.

He has taken it a step further since then, with the SCRIPT formula, which stands for sustainability, care and compassion, respect, innovation, prosperity, and trust, which are certainly values of Islam.

Ultimately though, Anwar will be judged on his performance as the PM and not his slogan. Anwar is the best person to effectively check the kind of Islam being pushed by PAS, which will be disastrous for Malaysia.