



Beyond boundaries

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THERE have been a slew of invitations this past week from the various ministries to the media and interviews with ministers aired over television stations publicising the first year achievements of this unity government; the Madani Government one-year anniversary celebrations at Bukit Jalil National Stadium ends today after three days of activities.

One of the ministries that has been super busy is no doubt the Foreign Ministry especially with the numerous overseas working trips undertaken by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. There are also many requests from abroad wanting to meet the Anwar's administration.

In a written reply to Dewan Rakyat in May, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Armizan Mohd Ali says a total of RM18.6mil has been spent by the government on official overseas visits by Cabinet members from January to April.

Of the total 64 official visits abroad by ministers, 15 were for the Prime Minister.

"The official visits were to help the government strengthen the economy through trade cooperation and attracting foreign direct investments," he said.

For the last one year Anwar has embarked on more than 20 trips overseas and according to Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir, Anwar's frequent travels abroad in the last few

The Anwar factor foreign policy

There needs to be clarity in charting policies to foster better diplomacy and trust.

months have generated a lot of interest and investments.

At a retreat on the future direction of Malaysia's foreign policy in March, Zambry says it has been agreed that Malaysia should fully leverage "the Anwar Ibrahim factor" as the prime minister is well known at the international stage to further boost its soft power capabilities.

Anwar also made it clear to some 100 Malaysian heads of mission at the retreat that his government's central focus is the economy. His priority is paying off with the International Trade and Industry Ministry announcing Malaysia attracted RM225bil of approved investments, a 6.6% increase from last year.

But just what is the direction of Malaysia's foreign policy under this prime minister? A check with more than 10 officials has an interesting revelation - lack of clarity.

"I think by nature, he is an extremely cautious man and always tries to please everyone. He is cautious sometimes to the point of indecisiveness.

"He has many friends who have supported him during his difficult times and friends mean the 'East' and the 'West'. Perhaps what they expect him to do may not be entirely aligned, even possibly conflicting among those friends and perhaps to Malaysia's long standing position.

"So it is difficult for him to "deliver" according to what his

friends expect," said an observer.

In his travels around Asean countries, Anwar has spoken to some of his counterparts that the group should not cling to old policies like non-interference in the domestic affairs of a member country.

"I know Wisma Putra is nervous when I touch on Myanmar but what is diplomacy, what is progress, what is independence without ethics and values?

"In the case of Myanmar, we have to deal with 200,000 refugees and the problem is exacerbated because the military junta refuses to negotiate and respect their neighbours.

"So we have a problem and I keep on telling Asean leaders we must come up with a solution, the old policy of constructive engagement is not relevant any more. People are being killed and driven away from their homes. So how do you deal with them," Anwar said during his session with the diplomats.

He may be forgiven for saying he is fairly a new leader to propose a solution to Myanmar's Rohingya crisis but this is Asean, without the consensus agreement of the other nine members, even if he finds a solution, it is no go.

Some officials may feel that this government's foreign policy is unclear but to be fair just how far can he depart from the policies which have been determined by the previous governments, espe-



Fostering ties: Prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim (right) shaking hand with Thailand prime minister Srettha Thavisin at the Malaysia (Bukit Kayu Hitam) - Thailand (Sadao) border after his one day working visit in Thailand recently. -ZHAFARAN NASIB/The Star

cially during Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's time.

"Anwar has his own personal views on certain issues in the past but he is now the prime minister. The art of diplomacy and idealism are two separate things.

"In diplomacy when you deal with leaders with other countries, trust is very important. If it is not there, whatever policy you have, old or new, will not work," said one officer.

Then there is also the need to score points with the domestic audience from all these international appearances - the people who voted for his party and those whom he tries to win support especially with constant talk of change in government.

"If we look at his domestic political prism, the narrative might be different. He is a politician and he needs to convince his supporters," said an official.

The world is getting to be more fragmented and Malaysia needs to see the changing geopolitics. It is not just the East and West anymore or hedging between China and the United States.

There are emerging important players and Malaysia must be strategic and see how it can fit in the changing landscape.

"We want to punch above our weight, but we have to be pragmatic also. We are a small country after all," said a senior diplomat.

The government has announced it has reopened the mission in

Baghdad last month and plans to open an office in Ethiopia where the African Union Commission is located. All this is part of promoting trade and strategic relations not just between countries but also other groups.

On paper, perhaps this is a good move and cannot be totally be dismissed. But the execution part is another matter especially with Wisma Putra's perpetual shortage of human capital.

I have been regularly following his speeches at official functions and replies in Parliament and I have noticed the prime minister has the tendency to digress from the issue he is raising or being asked. Sometimes his choice of words sends the wrong message especially when he touches on foreign matters. On several occasions clarifications had to be issued by his office or Wisma Putra.

Malaysia too cannot be selling Madani all the time when there are many other important issues to be addressed at international forums.

"Sometimes he is not clear when speaking out, unlike Dr Mahathir. I guess he has to be cautious to the point of indecisiveness," said an officer.

The rhetoric must be cut down. It is not useful when it comes to dealing with real issues at hand. Sometimes it is alright to stick to the script prepared to allow for the real message to be sent out there.