



Beyond boundaries

MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR
nierga@thestar.com.my

WHEN Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim arrives in Jakarta today for his first official visit to Indonesia as Prime Minister, he will be the fourth Malaysian leader Indonesian President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo meets in fewer than five years.

It is a tradition for any new Malaysian leader to travel to Indonesia first, signalling the close ties the two countries enjoy - except for hiccups along the way which have been managed considerably well by both sides in the last few years despite several changes in Malaysia's government.

Anwar needs no introduction to Jokowi or Indonesia thanks to his wide networking over the years. He visited Indonesia in his capacity as deputy prime minister in the 1990s but this time he is going there as the Prime Minister.

Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir was in Jakarta last week for an introductory visit as Malaysia's new Foreign Minister and to prepare for Anwar's visit. Zambry met his counterpart, Retno Marsudi, and identified issues that could be raised when the two national leaders meet

Eyes on Anwar in Jakarta

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim starts his overseas trips with a visit to Indonesia to further strengthen ties. The prime minister will soon appoint an envoy to Jakarta after the post has been left vacant for nearly two years.

in Bogor tomorrow.

"There are quite a number of issues, including maritime and land border delimitation, as well as Malaysia's support for the new Indonesian capital in Kalimantan. We have voiced our support for the capital move because this will also help that part of the region to prosper," Zambry said when contacted.

An official welcoming ceremony has been arranged for Anwar at Istana Bogor, just outside Jakarta, where a bilateral meeting and a press conference are also scheduled. While some of the bilateral issues will surely be raised, this visit is more for the leaders to touch base with each other.

Over the years Malaysia and Indonesia have been holding a leaders' annual consultation, a mechanism to resolve outstanding issues. It is the highest platform for discussion of ways to further strengthen relations as well as to deepen strategic and comprehensive cooperation. Leaders of the two countries take turns to host the consultation. The last consultation was held in 2017.

One of the bilateral issues still on the table is the hiring of maids from Indonesia and the use of the official channel to bring them in.

Malaysia is still the preferred destination for Indonesians to work as maids, more than other sectors such as plantation and manufacturing, said its ambassador to Malaysia, Hermono, last October.

However, Indonesia has many times voiced its concern about the mistreatment and abuse of their domestic helpers despite Kuala Lumpur's assurance that justice is served based on the country's laws.

Another issue that has been dragging on for years involves maritime and land borders, which are com-

plex problems that involve Malaysia's sovereignty in the seas.

In 2018 Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to joint technical proposals in the territorial sea boundary in Sulawesi and in the southern part of the Strait of Malacca. The joint Malaysia-Indonesia boundary committee on the demarcation and survey of the international boundary between Sabah and Sarawak and Indonesia's North Kalimantan and West Kalimantan are still being worked on.

But despite this, bilateral relations have remained on a strong footing, and cooperation in various fields have continued without any hitches.

Trade and economy play a big role in relations between Malaysia and Indonesia. In 2021, Indonesia was Malaysia's seventh largest trading partner and third largest among Asean member states with a total trade of RM95.31bil.

Between January and October 2022, trade reached RM110.44bil, an increase of 47.2% compared with RM75.03bil for the same period in 2021.

Jokowi, who was the first foreign leader to congratulate Anwar after he was sworn in as Prime Minister on Nov 24, said he believes that with Anwar at the helm, bilateral relations between Indonesia and Malaysia would be more prosperous.

"I hope we could meet soon to discuss ways to enhance our bilateral relations in the economy, border issues and protection of our people," Jokowi told Anwar.

This is an important year for Indonesia as it is the country's turn to take the Asean Chair; this follows on from its hosting of the Group of 20 summit last year.



Friendly neighbours: Anwar receiving congratulatory calls from foreign leaders on his first day in the Prime Minister's Office in November. Jokowi was the first one to call him. - SADIQ ASYRAF/PMO

In the last few years, the situation in Myanmar, the jailing of Aung San Suu Kyi and its humanitarian crisis dominated Asean meetings at foreign ministers and leaders' levels. The situation is turning for the worse and Asean as a group is struggling to deal with this problem in its own backyard.

It would be interesting to see if Jokowi and Anwar will address this issue as Anwar has yet to publicly state his views on it.

Jokowi's second five-year term as president is ending next year, which means there will be a new leader Malaysia will have to deal with. The Indonesian President has quietly but surely shown his leadership abilities, especially on the international stage.

Anwar will be accompanied by

Zambry and International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Tengku Zafrul Aziz, and will be greeted on arrival by Indonesian VIPs and Malaysian officials in Jakarta.

The entourage is as high-level as it gets for a prime minister's inaugural visit, except for one important vacancy: Indonesia is an important partner and friendly neighbour, the Malaysian government must send an ambassador to the country now to fill a post that has been vacant for nearly two years.

Yesterday, Zambry said that Anwar will announce the envoy soon, so let's hope the post will be quickly filled by a career diplomat, and that goes for other important Malaysian missions around the world, including Washington DC.