

# PM after Malay votes

With non-Malay votes confirmed as his fixed deposit, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has gone all out to win Malay hearts and minds ahead of the six state elections.

IT has been a heady seven months in the hot seat for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. The charismatic leader is living the dream, except that it would have been a less stressful dream if not for the looming six state elections.

The state polls will be a tougher test of the Prime Minister's mandate than the vote of confidence in Parliament last December.

With non-Malay votes confirmed as his fixed deposit, the state polls are essentially a battle for the Malay hearts and minds.

Anwar is aware of that, hence, the well-publicised religious gatherings in Putrajaya, the media focus on his Friday prayer schedule and his meals at places frequented by ordinary people.

He has also committed much-needed infrastructure allocations to Kedah and Kelantan.

The Prime Minister's habit of turning up for work in baju melayu (worn in his trademark style with the top hanging loose over his sampang), songkok and chapals is also seen as a signal to the Malay base.

Will his efforts reverse the green wave and win him the Malay support so crucial for the continued stability of his administration?

Opinion is quite divided. Some say it will be status quo, a stalemate with both sides holding on to what they have.

Some believe that the green wave will grow stronger, Selangor will fall, Negri Sembilan will be shaken and the Penang government will lose its two-thirds majority.

Then there are those who hope that the unity government will make progress on the Malay front and win a few seats in the Malay crescent states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu.

Election night will be exciting and full of suspense.

Anwar's charisma and spontaneity clearly appeals to those who attend his events. But an aide to a former minister said it is important not to be lulled into a false sense of assurance because such events are highly choreographed.

Event turnouts, said the aide, do not always translate into votes as proven by the big Umno gatherings before the general election.



## Analysis

"What surprised me was that he did not make the effort to send off pilgrims leaving for the haj. That is an easy win," said the above aide.

Umno, said a Penang lawyer, miscalculated the moral sentiments of young Malays who, no matter how urbanised or liberal, were disdainful of the party.

"The Umno leadership is still not acceptable to them. Moreover, Malay suspicion of Pakatan Harapan and especially of DAP is deep-rooted and cannot be erased over a few months," said the lawyer.

The dichotomy between the races is all too real and there is a joke that Chinese living in Sungai Petani look at Komtar in Penang as their government whereas Malays in northern Seberang Perai look to Kedah for political direction.

Anwar's focus has also been on the young cohort, especially students in tertiary learning institutions, where the gatherings have been warm and engaging.

"But what about the larger Malay masses out there? The food delivery riders, pasar malam traders and government servants?" asked the Penang lawyer.

Some also asked what on earth inspired the unity government to act on the kalimah Allah issue when it is fighting a Malay election. The timing did not make sense and has not gone down well with the Malays.

Has the Prime Minister also been too focused on the religious elements of his government and not enough on bread and butter issues?

Pockets are tight and spending power is down. Former Umno politician Wan Hakim Wan Mokhtar said the sales at his Tealive outlet in Kemanan is down almost 30% while the makcik selling pisang goreng nearby told him that her sales have also dropped.

Wan Hakim said that Umno can, at best, win four seats in Terengganu and one seat in Telomong in a worst case scenario.

He admitted that sentiments have changed little since the general election. Even the absence of Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar - who was away in Auckland - during the annual floods failed to dent support for PAS.

"He can be in Auckland or go to the moon, they will still support PAS," said Wan Hakim.

Is the Prime Minister too invested in the green wave narrative?

"With a two-thirds majority in Parliament, he holds the purse strings, he has corporate backers and the media to help him. The religious trump card is held by PAS. PMX's trump card lies in delivering on the economy," said the above Penang lawyer.

However, Anwar is such a smooth operator, or in the words of Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Johari Ghani: "Anwar is a political maestro."

Johari, a business and media mogul, was among those at an economic pow-wow chaired by the Prime Minister. The meeting included several big guns from leading institutions and top ministry officials.

But it was the presence of former minister Khairy Jamaluddin in photos of the meeting on Anwar's Instagram that sparked hundreds of comments.

The discussion went well, but it was not until a cameraman entered and snapped away from every corner of the room that Johari realised the meeting was also to signal that Anwar acknowledges what Khairy can bring to the table.

And this took place just days before Khairy was to decide whether he would be joining Bersatu.

"My point is, don't underestimate Anwar. This man is a champion in managing public perception. Don't jump to judge him as yet," said Johari.

Anwar has gone the distance and he is definitely more than prepared to face the Malay voters.

**The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.**