



## Beyond boundaries

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IT WAS a courtesy call on the Prime Minister by the latest batch of new Malaysia's heads of mission. For most, it was their first time meeting Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, but it was not so for Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, who has known Anwar for decades.

It is a normal routine for these envoys to meet certain Cabinet members for briefing on the latest policies and the government's expectations.

"Nothing controversial. It was a relaxed session and free flow of discussion. He addressed us individually on what he knows about the countries we are going to," said one ambassador.

Nazri, whose appointment was met with criticism from some quarters, admitted many eyes will be on him in the next two years in Washington DC.

He insisted that other countries too appoint politicians for ambassadorship, citing the example of Australia nominating former prime minister Kevin Rudd as its ambassador to the United States.

"From there we know how important an ambassador is and must not only be a career diplomat but also experienced in politics.

"This is political relations too. This is not about employment, this is work for the country.

"For me, the prime minister has given specific instructions includ-

# High expectations, low motivations

The Prime Minister has instructed our envoys to bring back investment, among others, but he also needs to really understand the constraints they face in carrying out their job.



**Informative session:** Meeting the PM and Cabinet members is routine for new ambassadors before they leave for their overseas posting but many were excited to meet Anwar. - Facebook

ing to help repatriate the 1MDB money that is due to Malaysia especially in the United States. He has said what he wants to do with the money," said Nazri.

Member of Parliament for Titiwangsa Datuk Johari Ghani said in Parliament this week that US investment bank Goldman Sachs' US\$2.5bil (RM10.7bil) settlement over its role in the 1MDB scandal is unfair and Putrajaya should scrutinise previous negotiations held by the former administration.

The former second finance minister was also perplexed over the poor negotiations that took place between the previous government and Goldman Sachs and questioned why summonses were not filed against the investment bank in the US.

Anwar's name carries weight and his face is recognised globally. For this group of envoys, they are excited to work with this prime minister. In the last few years, Malaysia's image has been battered and bashed over the financial scan-

dal and it did not help that there were four government changes in less than five years.

"When news on 1MDB scandal started, my foreign diplomat friends were asking for details. There was no information or talking points coming from Putrajaya. We had to plead ignorance or laugh it off," said one officer. It must have been an embarrassing situation for these frontliners when they were left in the dark.

The courtesy call on the prime minister in Putrajaya went on for about an hour where he explained what he wanted to do for Malaysia and how he wanted these diplomats to help him as the prime minister.

"He spoke about Malaysia Madani, good governance, rule of law and of course corruption," said an ambassador in attendance.

One diplomat said his foreign counterparts in the country he served told him that they have gotten used to the frequent change in Malaysia's leadership.

"But they are excited over this man, Anwar Ibrahim, who has a lot of friends all over the world. His story, his life, people want to see how Malaysia is under him. My NGO friends are excited that he is a reformist, that he is a Muslim and a progressive one. Yes, that is the expectation," he said.

The prime minister has from day one spoken about bringing in foreign investments. He repeated the same message to this group.

"He told us what to do and to get investment. That Malaysia is a small trading nation and we cannot commit to one. We need to be friendly with the big powers, the US, China and Russia.

"All these good relations must be translated into investments from these countries," said Nazri.

Anwar is not saying anything new as the role of our ambassadors has always been to strengthen government to government ties, improve economic relations, look for trade and investment and promote Malaysia for poten-

tial tourism.

Sounds like a tall order? Promoting Malaysia and getting the right investors is not Wisma Putra's job alone nor its core responsibility. There are agencies like MIDA and Matrade to do such jobs.

Our envoys are expected to do this too but one snag though - driving investment and promoting Malaysia's goods for export involve a lot of networking, holding promotional events, etc; that means spending money.

The Foreign Ministry has been having budget constraints for many years and the previous administration has admitted to this in private conversations and it was an uphill battle to convince the Finance Ministry for extra allocation. A few years back a slew of tightening measures were imposed including a cut in utility bills and overtime claims, causing unhappiness among Malaysian diplomatic staff who felt their welfare was overlooked. The situation today has not changed much.

The prime minister at that meeting indicated that he is aware of the situation.

"When we saw him at the PMO, he did express his understanding on the constraints faced by Wisma due to its budget. He is also aware of the poor maintenance of our diplomatic properties abroad and overall welfare of diplomats and their families," said one ambassador.

His colleague admitted that he has been trying to replace some 20-year old furniture in his official residence but to no avail.

In last week's Budget tabling the ministry has been allocated more than RM970mil, out of which RM809m is allocated for operating expenditures and the rest for development expenditure. Among others, the allocation would be used in intensifying efforts in stimulating economic growth in facilitating FDI into Malaysia.

Budget 2023 too would go towards upgrading the service infrastructure at home and abroad and improving the welfare of officers.

Words and promises must be translated into action.

"We need all the support to discharge our duty," said one senior official.

These are our frontliners who have been keeping the Jalur Gemilang flying.