

Was it really a Saudi royal snub?

The mystery surrounding Anwar's failure to meet the Saudi King or Crown Prince deepens.

NO one is prepared to talk about what happened in Saudi Arabia where the Prime Minister had failed to meet King Salman Abdul Aziz Al Saud or Crown Prince Mohammed Salman Al Saud.

His political opponents have gone to town to demand an explanation from Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for what they described as a royal snub.

They described it as a diplomatic fiasco and a waste of public funds as Anwar and his delegation could only manage to perform their umrah.

Given the political and diplomatic sensitivities involved, what happened has remained a mystery and, unfortunately, led to speculations and raised more questions.

But high-level sources said the PM would not have been so brazen as to proceed with the trip, described as an official trip in a Wisma Putra release, without a confirmation.

They said the green light had been given in a short notice and indeed the programme, which included an audience with His Majesty, had been approved.

"We received a third-person note. Surely, we would not go ahead with-

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Comment

out that," said a senior source.

The third-person note is a term used by diplomats to describe an official letter of communication between an embassy and the Foreign Ministry.

The contents can be on anything but mostly bilateral matters, including visits involving leaders and especially heads of state.

The national media had caught wind of the visit to Saudi Arabia since last week but there was no confirmation until the late press release by Wisma Putra.

Many had initially thought that PMX - as Anwar, being Malaysia's 10th Prime Minister, is popularly called - would make China the first country he would visit after Asean,

where it is customary for a new government leader to visit every member country.

The sources said because of the late confirmation of the Saudi programme, the PM had to decide on short notice.

"If he didn't take the slot, the worry would be that the Saudis would be offended.

"A quick call had to be made and the PM decided to proceed with it," a diplomat said.

But the trip has unfortunately ended without a meeting with the two leaders, which would have been the highlight of the visit.

While it's an embarrassment for Anwar, it has not been completely a waste as he managed to meet several Saudi business groups including Ajlan & Bros Holding Group and Wadi Makkah Knowledge Co - with memoranda of understanding signed with Malaysian partners, as well as meeting leaders from the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and Muslim World League.

The question now is what has gone wrong. The real powerhouse is the Saudi royalty, and not the country's foreign ministry.

Given the importance of bilateral

ties between Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, much must be done to improve relations, particularly at the personal level.

Total bilateral trade for 2022 amounted to a sum of US\$10.26bil (RM45.89bil), which is an increase of 159.2% compared to US\$4.23bil in 2021.

There are plenty of opportunities for Malaysians there, including the Neom city project, the Red Sea Project and the Saudi Green Initiative Project.

Neom is a planned smart city in Tabuk province in Saudi Arabia, where a ski resort is being planned and will contain cities, resorts and other developments.

Relations with Saudi are given priority and King Salman was also among the earliest to congratulate Anwar's appointment as PM.

But as Anwar has said, there are issues that need to be negotiated and ironed out.

In 2018, the then Pakatan Harapan administration had ordered the King Salman Centre for International Peace project set to be built in Putrajaya to be cancelled. The Saudi-backed anti-terrorism centre was launched in 2017 under

Barisan Nasional during Datuk Seri Najib Razak's premiership.

Pakatan's then defence minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Sabu also ordered Malaysian troops serving in Saudi Arabia to maintain its neutrality in the region.

Malaysia had deployed troops to the kingdom in 2015 to facilitate the evacuation of Malaysians trapped in Yemen.

For the next few days, and maybe even during the state elections, Anwar's Saudi trip will be used against him, where comparisons will be made with ex-PM Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's visit when he was accorded full honours.

But the attention will shift to Beijing over the next few days as Anwar makes the all-important official visit to China.

China has been Malaysia's No. 1 trading partner for the last 14 years consecutively and both countries will celebrate 50 years of friendship next year.

Anwar is certain to get the proper red-carpet welcome and recognition for Malaysia in China.

For now, it looks like what happened in Saudi remains in Saudi without substantiated information.