

Anwar Ibrahim's quiet triumph

Despite all dire predictions and political manoeuvring, the PM will soon mark his first year in power.

THE path from political prisoner to political power is by no means well-trodden, but those who have made the arduous journey in recent decades include luminaries such as Nelson Mandela, Jawaharlal Nehru, Aung San Suu Kyi, Michelle Bachelet and Vaclav Havel.

To this august group must be added Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who, after nine years in prison, is now showing the same zeal as Mandela did for institutional and economic reform rooted in democratic values.

When I first met Anwar in 1976, he was president of Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Abim), the Islamic youth movement that he founded, and seemed destined for a life spent in the Opposition.

But then, in 1982, the ruling party, Umno, wisely invited him to join its ranks.

In 1993, after a rapid ascent, Anwar became deputy prime minister in then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's government and was his heir apparent - until the Asian Financial Crisis intervened.

In 1998, Dr Mahathir sacked Anwar over policy disputes that mushroomed into suspicions that Anwar was plotting a coup.

Anwar's fall was as swift as it was steep; a photo of him appearing in court with a black eye and bruises, courtesy of Dr Mahathir's police chief, shocked the world.

Anwar was given two long pris-



Comment

on sentences, and was an inmate from 1999 to 2004 and again from 2014 to 2018.

But he did not break, and during this time emerged as the leader of a newly invigorated Opposition.

Ironically, Anwar returned to power by partnering with his nemesis, Dr Mahathir, to overthrow the ruling Umno coalition in 2018.

But Dr Mahathir failed to honour his agreement to step down after two years and hand over the reins of leadership to Anwar.

Instead, Malaysia endured a succession of prime ministers over the next four years, raising fears of political instability.

Against this backdrop, Anwar stunned the country by leading a broad coalition to electoral victory in 2022; he was, at last, sworn in as prime minister on Nov 24 that year.

But many believed his extraordinary comeback would be short-lived, owing to Malaysia's complex multiethnic political system.

When Malaysia gained inde-

pendence in 1957, 50% of the population was Malay and 37% was Chinese. By 2022, the Malay share of the population had risen to 70%, while the Chinese share had shrunk to 23%. Further complicating matters is the country's long history of pro-Malay affirmative-action policies.

Strong support from the ethnic majority - almost all of whom are Muslim - is therefore necessary to forge a successful government.

Anwar's ruling coalition, however, lacks sufficient Malay support, despite now including even Umno.

To be sure, proliferating corruption scandals have deeply wounded Umno in recent years: former party leader and prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is serving a 12-year prison sentence for abuse of power, money laundering, and criminal breach of trust, while current party head Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi has faced similar charges.

And yet, on Nov 24, Anwar will mark his first year in power.

Citing his coalition's decent performance in recent state elections, many are now predicting that Anwar will remain in office for a minimum of five years, breaking the cycle of short-serving prime ministers.

Equally important, Sultan Ibrahim Almarhum Sultan Iskandar, the influential ruler of Johor, will be installed as Malaysia's king in January 2024.

The country rotates the crown

every five years among nine hereditary state sultans, making the position purely ceremonial.

But Sultan Ibrahim is unusual in his outspokenness.

When a Malay Muslim laundromat owner in Johor announced that he would not serve people of other faiths, the Sultan excoriated him, saying that "this is not a Taliban state" and calling the exclusionary policy "extremist in nature". The owner quickly fell in line.

Support for Malaysia's conservative Islamist parties is undoubtedly on the rise. But, at the risk of oversimplifying, the country has a strong tradition of more secular-minded politicians who give equal weight to inclusivity alongside Islamic principles.

Together, Anwar and Sultan Ibrahim could ensure government stability and develop policies that benefit all ethnic groups. It is promising that Sultan Ibrahim has expressed how well he works with Anwar, compared with past prime ministers.

Anwar's government has also made significant progress in attracting foreign direct investment (including from Elon Musk, whom Anwar personally wooed) and transforming the country into a data hub.

In a recent speech, Anwar reaffirmed his commitment to doing "whatever needs to be done, whatever is necessary to ensure that Malaysia remains an attractive, competitive destination

for investments"

Partly owing to these efforts, the World Bank has projected that Malaysia's economy will grow by 3.9% this year, and 4.3% in 2024, making it one of the strongest economies in Asean.

Anwar has also recently announced some ambitious reforms, including new progressive taxes and subsidy cuts to target the poor more effectively.

This is a vast improvement from Umno's corrupt rule.

As a moderate, centrist politician, Anwar could bring stability to a beleaguered body politic.

This stability is essential for the continued success of Asean, which has achieved remarkable economic growth in the last few decades but is now troubled by Myanmar's protracted civil conflict and Thailand's ongoing political disputes.

Given the boost Anwar could provide for Malaysia and South-East Asia, we must hope that he remains in office. — Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2023. www.project-syndicate.org

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