

IN the past five months, I traveled to the Netherlands, Germany, Singapore, China and Saudi Arabia, and in each country, I kept hearing a recurring theme - the unbearable cost of living and the inability of their leaders to find a solution.

If you're going to Singapore, just pop into a taxi and hear the drivers whining about their leaders. This, in a nation supposedly better and more respected in the region, if not the world.

The anger is probably felt most in the island republic's heartland, where the working class is upset at rental costs and the increasing number of high-earning expatriates. More frighteningly, the suicide rate has risen nearly 26% last year, the highest level in over two decades.

The Dutch four-party coalition government collapsed after only 18 months in power, and now, their preference is veteran anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders, who still needs a partner to form the government.

The fallout was over the country's migration rules, and as pockets become shallower, the world's most liberal country is also becoming less tolerant of immigrants.

In Saudi Arabia, I was reminded by ordinary citizens that not all Saudis are oil-rich sheikhs, and they, too, must grapple with housing loan payments.

Rent in Riyadh, for example, is on average 90% higher than in Kuala Lumpur with the monthly household budget for a family of four estimated at RM14,000.

It's the same story in Malaysia even though we have been able to manage our inflation to keep it at around 3% because of heavy subsidies by the government. Our diesel and petrol prices are among the lowest in the world.

But with a huge food import bill and a depreciating ringgit, Malaysians are discontented, and no survey is required to say otherwise.

Only the apple-polishers and sycophants around Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim will tell him that Malaysians are a happy lot, and surveys recording a decline in his administration's popularity shouldn't be believed.

Sure, we can argue over methodology and the margin of error, as with all surveys. Some surveys are even allegedly financed by opponents, but if one listens carefully to the ground, the rakyat's grumbling can be deafening.

But against the backdrop of dissatisfaction, which includes slow implementation of reforms, unfulfilled promises and frustrated expectations, we also need to remind ourselves of certain realities and achievements.

Many Malaysians have forgotten that since 2020, we've had four PMs and Cabinets. That's staggering, given the stability we

No easy task for PMX

Anwar is putting the right foot forward but he still has plenty to fix - and needs to do it quickly.



Comment

displayed before.

The fourth PM in that time span arrived in November 2022 in the form of Anwar. And even after the country's first unity government was formed, Malaysia continued to face speculations that PMX, as the 10th PM is fondly referred to, could be ousted, or even challenged.

Given such uncertainties, could we expect any rational foreign investor to put money in Malaysia if they're unsure of the incumbent government's longevity?

Don't forget, many of us were even worried that the "Green Wave" led by PAS would continue to win over the states under Pakatan Harapan.

After a year, it's safe and fair to say that Anwar is set to be in charge for the next four years. Political stability is essential to attract any kind of direct foreign investment, and although it's our prized asset, it was glaringly absent over the past five years.

The PM's physical presence is a very important sign to investors that stability has returned, hence policy consistency. This is indeed very reassuring to major investors, whose planned investments run into billions of ringgit.

Let's be fair and give credit to PMX. We can quarrel over the ethics of Bersatu MPs pledging support for PMX, but if five PKR MPs did likewise for the Opposition, the latter would be singing a different tune.

As at June 2022, the outstanding debt of 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) was RM32.1bil and it has probably gone up because of our shrinking ringgit. This is a massive migraine for any PM or Finance Minister, and unfortunately for him, Anwar is both.

Handling legacy issues is a nightmare and the ordinary Malaysian can't be expected to understand the massive debts we have accumulated.

There has been a lot of whining over PMX's need to travel so much. For a start, as the new PM, he had to visit nine Asean member countries as the new government leader.

From the comments written by some journalists, even senior ones, it's obvious they were unaware of such a protocol.

Reporters who cover our PM's visits, whether official or working trips, would understand that they're not there for a holiday.

The pace is often punishing, and a lot of preparation is put into them by the Foreign Ministry, and Investment, Trade and Industry Ministry (Miti).

While it's important that Anwar tackle the problems at home, these overseas trips are also high priorities.

Don't expect international investors to come to Malaysia when they're being wooed and pursued by our neighbours. Indonesia president Jokowi Widodo is certainly all over the world, sometimes even ahead of Anwar's arrival.

Businessmen appreciate meeting the PM together with the Miti minister, as collectively, it exhibits the government's commitment to facilitating investments at the highest level.

With the PM leading the charge, direction on policies can be made promptly and followed through by relevant ministries.

It also inspires confidence when the PM himself assures investors that bureaucracy is being addressed diligently by Miti and its relevant agencies.

Most times, meetings are arranged back to back, with very little break in between.

In San Francisco, he met five major American multinationals within two hours, a session tucked into a gruelling Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Leaders' meeting schedule and bilateral meetings from Nov 15-17.

His visit to New York for the United Nations General Assembly had the same schedule. Besides meeting foreign leaders, he used the occasion for facetime with big names from Amazon, Airbnb, Boeing, ConocoPhillips and Kimberly-Clark.

Reporters who covered Anwar said the day would start at 8.30am and usually end at 11pm.

Meeting investors doesn't in any way diminish the efforts of the Miti minister, but PMX's presence certainly adds a different level of gravitas to some of these engagements.

One thing's for sure, Anwar is at his charming and persuasive best when he is doing a sales pitch for Malaysia.

Then, there's the question of whether all those billions of ringgit pledged would truly translate

into real deals and not mere meaningless memorandums of understanding (MOUs). These are fair questions which deserve proper explanations.

So, what time scale is involved for these "billions" of investment ringgit pledges to take effect?

It would depend on the nature and complexity of the investments. For instance, committed investments take anywhere between 18 and 36 months to be realised.

Miti has set up the Investment & Trade Action Coordination Committee - a multi-ministry, multi-agency committee which also involves state government representatives - to expedite approvals for investment realisation. Its Malaysian Investment Development Authority (Mida), too, is playing a huge role in facilitating investments and easing investors' journey.

The process includes having representatives of relevant authorities (the Inland Revenue Board, Customs, Immigration, Human Resources Department, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Tenaga Nasional Bhd) housed within a dedicated space in Mida, representing a one-stop centre for investors called the Invest Malaysia Facilitation Centre (IMFC), which will start operating from Dec 1.

Then, there are concerns whether Anwar's ardent pro-Palestinian campaign could pose risks and anger business groups in the United States and Europe.

I'd like to think that they know Anwar has been consistent on the plight of the Palestinians. It doesn't matter if it's Hamas or the rival Palestine Liberation Organisation, because he is simply on the side of humanity.

He can't afford to take a passive stand on this issue with 70% of the country's electorate - the Malay-Muslim majority - potentially emotionally impacted. It will generate a disastrous domestic political backlash on his party, PKR, and the government.

Many of us take for granted that he is the first PM from a multi-racial party, even if it has a strong Malay base.

But foreign leaders and investors understand that Anwar is a moderate. In fact, many of his critics would admit that he's a better alternative than anyone from PAS. The reality, though, is PAS has more elected representatives than Bersatu.

For many Malaysians, while we understand that he needs to shore

up his Malay support, we can't comprehend why he needs to compete with PAS.

They're a lost cause. They comprise leaders and voters who believe that concerts equal LGBT advocacy and hedonism, or free sex.

Banning Swatch watches with LGBT references, for example, which nobody knew existed until the Home Ministry raided related shops, surely didn't earn PMX any new fans from PAS.

So, what should Anwar do in the face of these frustrations on the ground?

He must focus on alleviating the rakyat's and small medium industries' plights and concerns, particularly on their daily living and survival challenges.

Anwar needs to keep reminding domestic stakeholders of the importance of investments in boosting economic growth, but also balancing it with other key determinants, including consumption, government spending, exports and more.

Prioritise international engagements with key economies and strategic geographies, and be selective for a better impact.

The economy is everything. Fill the pockets of the people, make their daily lives bearable and if that means removing non-performing and mediocre ministers, let heads roll.

Reshuffling the Cabinet doesn't mean changing the portfolios but simply replacing non-performers with good personnel - even if they're technocrats and non-elected representatives - installed to posts that need competency.

If he must add a few new ministries, just go ahead with the new names and changes soon.

Anwar needs to more assertive, decisive and firm. He can't continue to be tolerant of under-performing ministers.

For many Malaysians, the choice is still simple - better Anwar than anyone from a party preoccupied with polygamy, concerts, dressing or getting Lim and Lee mixed up, and even believing Lee Kuan Yew is still alive in Singapore. Apparently, Elvis has not left the building either.

He's just a year into the job. The unity government needs our continued support, and we can't afford another PM, but there is a caveat.

PMX can't take our votes for granted and we expect him to start delivering more in the next four years. Even if just by a shade, the future at least looks brighter.