



## Beyond boundaries

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THE text messages came in fast and furious on Monday. Disbelief and shock were the order of the day. *The Star* had just reported that former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra had been appointed as advisor to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as Asean chair, and those who follow Asean news and issues were questioning this columnist about the hows and whys of this rather strange move.

I have been writing on Asean issues and have covered umpteenth Asean summits and meetings over the years, and I have never come across such an appointment. I was as baffled as everyone else. It is unprecedented, really.

Next year, Malaysia is the Asean chair for the fifth time. The chair is rotated annually among the 10-member group.

Following his bilateral meeting with Paetongtarn Shinawatra, current Thai Prime Minister and Thaksin's daughter, Anwar held a joint press conference at Perdana Putra.

During his welcoming remarks, Anwar boldly announced Thaksin's appointment.

"Now the seventh annual consultation (Malaysia-Thai) is timely. Of course, taking stock of the

# A baffling appointment

There are many questions about why Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim needs foreign advisors for his role as Asean chair.

excellent bilateral relations with former prime minister Thaksin, who I have agreed to appoint as my personal advisor, as chairman of Asean, with a team of members from Asean countries in an informal setup. Thank you for agreeing to this because we need the benefit of the experience of such statesmen," Anwar said.

There was no question and answer session. The matter was left hanging until Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan addressed the issue when hosting a media dinner later.

"I have received so many WhatsApp messages from people asking me about this. No need to be alarmed.

"Tak ada cerita apa-apa. Tak macam cerita dua tiga hari ni, saya masih Umno," he joked.

Mohamad said the appointment was meant for the Prime Minister's friends who are still influential despite not being in office like Thaksin and (Cambodia's) Hun Sen and others who are elderly statesmen and can advise their country's leaders. These leaders, he said, referring to the current people in power, are already third or fourth generation and may not know the spirit of why Asean was established.

"They can be informal advisors to the Prime Minister as the Asean chair, not advisor to Asean," he said, referring to the elder statesmen.

When this writer asked who else would be in this advisory role, Mohamad said more would be revealed.

"They are his old friends and still influential. Their role is informal where they can discuss and talk, not so much for advice but for their insights on how Asean can move forward.

"Thaksin is influential in Thailand and he is accepted by the United States and very close



Strange move: Anwar and Thaksin (right) might be friends but that is no reason to officially announce the former Thai PM as an advisor, surely? - Bernama/AFP

with China. This positions him as a bridge for Asean.

"I have proposed to the Prime Minister that maybe we can speed up the Asean-US summit so that Asean is not seen as leaning to just one side," Mohamed added.

Granted, there is only so much that the Foreign Minister can say about the advisory role of former leaders of neighbouring countries because it would not be at his level to deal with them.

The Thaksin announcement has caused a ripple regionally, and not in a good way.

An Asean diplomat said it is an unprecedented move and there has been a discussion within diplomatic circles. Names of several former Foreign ministers, not from Malaysia, were widely mentioned among diplomats as possibly better advisors.

"We acknowledged the fact that he is free to have his advisors but even if he wanted to do this, he didn't need to announce," the diplomat said, referring to Anwar.

"We understand that there should be affinity among present Asean leaders. Those days they can just call each other and ask each other for help. Now it's a dif-

ferent generation and there is a gap in seniority among the leaders, so we need to build that up again," he said.

Reaction on social media has been critical and there are questions about whether Malaysia lacks experts to advise the Prime Minister during the Asean chairmanship.

The optics are not good and it makes the Prime Minister look less than capable when he needs a group of foreign advisors to advise him as Asean chair.

Sure, the 75-year-old Thaksin has connections but he is surrounded by his fair share of controversies.

Anwar has been travelling around the globe in the last two years to meet world leaders, yet when it comes to the Asean chairmanship, he finds it fit to appoint a former foreign prime minister to advise him.

"What does it say about PMX? He has been going all over the world and has no connections?" asked a former civil servant, calling Anwar by the nickname that refers to him being Malaysia's 10th PM.

Malaysia has a pool of retired,

experienced, and brilliant diplomats who the Prime Minister can easily tap for expertise - unless, of course, Anwar thinks they are not good enough to advise him.

Asean has been in existence for more than 50 years and it has in place all the necessary mechanisms, there is no need to have advisors.

"An informal advisor means you can always pick up the phone and talk to him, that is informal. But to announce this at a press conference is perhaps not a good reflection on Wisma Putra, Miti [Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry] and all those people who are already advising him," said a government official.

There is no clarity on Thaksin's actual role, but some are speculating it could possibly be helping to tackle the violence and consequent humanitarian crisis which is entering its fourth year in Myanmar.

But then again Asean already has in place its Five-Point Consensus to bring about a sustainable resolution and peace in this troubled Asean member country. In fact, Asean Foreign ministers held an informal consultation in Bangkok just this week to discuss Myanmar.

Anwar's announcement about Thaksin just does not sound right - it may have been premature and, certainly, the setting was improper. The PM may have many close friends he can lean on and seek advice from but that is something that can be done quietly.

There is nothing wrong with exchanging views but the Prime Minister must explain more about this perplexing appointment, especially when the chairmanship has not even begun. This is not the time for distractions, not when Asean is facing so many issues and challenges.