

Anwar's strategic outreach to Pakistan and Bangladesh



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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's just-concluded visits to Pakistan and Bangladesh might have slipped under the radar of many Malaysians. After all, an honorary doctorate and the conferring of Pakistan's highest state award notwithstanding, these trips weren't as headline-grabbing as his engagements with China, Japan or Russia.

And if you look only at the numbers, they also pale in comparison. Last year, Malaysia's total trade with Pakistan stood at RM7.84 billion and with Bangladesh at RM12.7 billion — combined, it is less than what Petronas makes in a month.

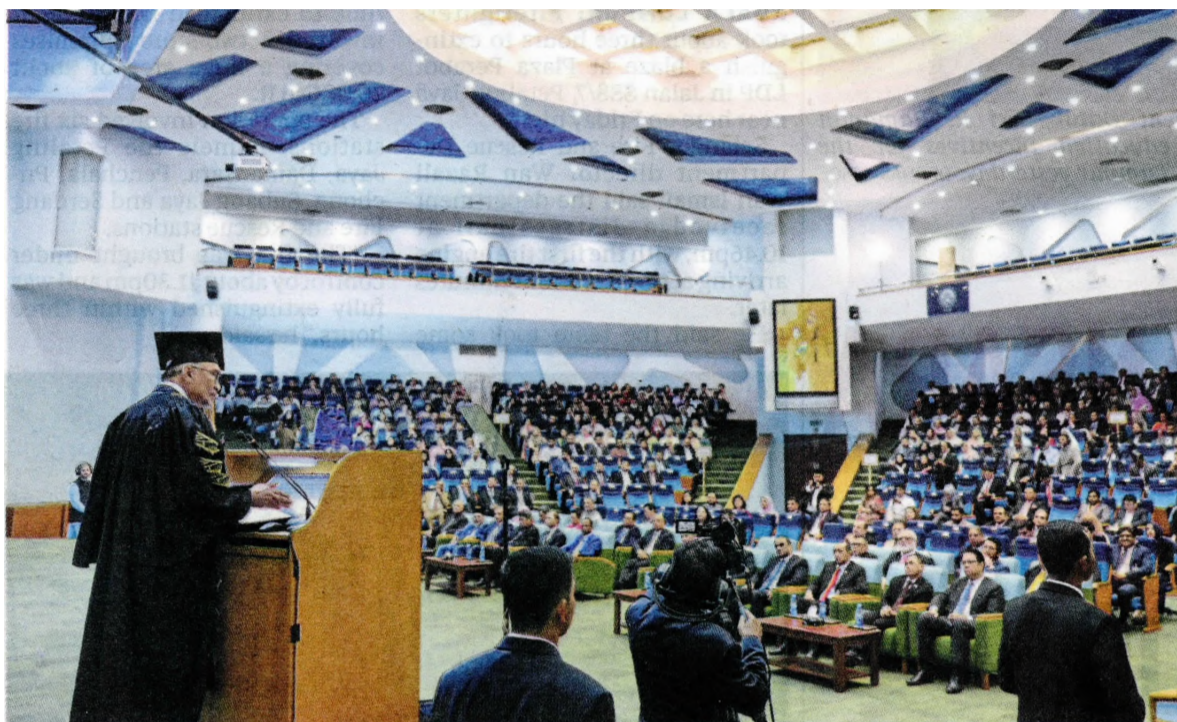
But if you focus on trade figures alone, you would miss the bigger picture. Pakistan and Bangladesh matter far more to Malaysia than the statistics suggest. Both countries hold immense potential for Malaysia, though decades of political strife and external challenges have kept them from realising their full promise.

Pakistan has been bogged down by repeated military interventions, political upheaval and the turmoil in Afghanistan. Indeed, as we left Islamabad for Dhaka as part of the prime minister's delegation, the air was thick with political unease as the capital and neighbouring Rawalpindi were locked down over former prime minister Imran Khan's calls for protests against a controversial constitutional amendment.

Nonetheless, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, whose "leadership, wisdom and unwavering friendship" Anwar lauded as having "further strengthened the enduring bonds between Pakistan and Malaysia", has demonstrated firm stewardship in navigating these turbulent times.

Bangladesh, meanwhile, has hitherto been trapped in dynastic rivalries that have created deep societal divides. Even taking it at face value, the student-led revolution of Aug 5 that toppled Sheikh Hasina still has miles to go on what is surely a long and winding road.

These are tough neighbourhoods, but reforms are underway. Both nations are working hard to



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim delivering a keynote address after receiving an Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy from the National University of Sciences and Technology in Islamabad on Thursday. Invoking Pakistan's great poet-philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal, Anwar made a rallying call for a renewal of the Muslim world. BERNAMA PIC

claw their way out of their quagmire. The challenges are daunting. Governance issues are deep-seated and quick-fix reforms are not only impractical but may also be counterproductive.

Yet, it is precisely these efforts to address such deep-rooted challenges that make Anwar's visits so crucial. Quite far apart from the rockstar allure that Anwar exudes, both Pakistan and Bangladesh view him as a key statesman in the geopolitical arena and they look to Malaysia's revitalised economy as a model for their own ambitions.

Malaysia's success, marked by exceptional growth in sectors like semiconductors and phenomenal spikes in digital-centric and tech-driven foreign direct investments, has no doubt been spurred by strong fundamentals and bold structural reforms.

Such achievements offer valuable insights for their economic aspirations. From the speeches by Sharif and Bangladesh interim government chief adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, it is clear Anwar's war on corruption and nepotism resonates with them.

Anwar's vision transcends short-term gains, emphasising long-term partnerships and the

promise of future potential. As Anwar reiterated during the joint press conferences, these are relationships that go beyond material advantage, strategic or otherwise, venturing into the familial and the personal, forged on the anvil of brotherly ties cemented by trust and mutual respect.

One of the most striking aspects of Pakistan and Bangladesh is their youthful populations. In Pakistan, two-thirds of the population are under age 30, and in Bangladesh, more than a quarter of its 170 million people are between 15 and 29.

While youth unemployment and social instability loom large, these young people represent an enormous untapped resource. By harnessing their energy, creativity and desire for inclusion, they could become the driving force behind a new era of economic growth for both nations.

Pakistan's youth are already making their mark globally, especially in the freelance economy. From software development to digital marketing, young Pakistanis have become some of the world's largest suppliers of freelance talent.

In Bangladesh, the story is similar. Young entrepreneurs in the

tech and startup sectors are rising rapidly, positioning themselves — and their country — for success in the global digital economy.

But there's a perception problem. In Malaysia, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are often seen as migrant workers — labourers who toil in construction sites, restaurants, plantations and factories or low-wage hired hands tending nurseries and gardens. Malaysia is home to a substantial number of migrant workers from both nations, with about 450,000 Bangladeshis having arrived in Malaysia since August 2022.

While these workers are vital to Malaysia's economic engine, the relationship between Malaysia and these countries should not — and cannot — be confined to migrant labour. Malaysia has long relied on migrant labour, but the country is shifting towards prioritising high-tech skilled labour to drive future economic growth.

Pakistan and Bangladesh are promising markets for Malaysia in sectors such as palm oil, halal products and Islamic finance. The potential for future collaboration is immense.

Take Pakistan's financial system. By 2027, Pakistan will fully transition to a syariah-compliant banking model, following a landmark ruling by the Federal Shariat Court. This presents Malaysia, a global leader in Islamic finance, with an opportunity to share expertise in Islamic financial products like sukuk.

In Bangladesh, Anwar's visit

carried particular significance as he became the first foreign leader to visit the country under its interim government led by Nobel laureate Yunus.

During their meeting, Anwar lauded Yunus as "the embodiment of selfless leadership, dedicated to the betterment of his people".

With friendship going back four decades, the chemistry between the two was palpable, with Anwar affirming that while the shape of Bangladesh's future governance rests with its citizens, Malaysia stands ready to lend a helping hand.

For Anwar, this visit was a gesture of solidarity with what he sees as a reform movement that mirrors Malaysia's journey. Anwar's engagement with Bangladesh at this critical juncture reflects his desire to support the country's efforts to strengthen governance and combat corruption.

Malaysia — the first Muslim country to recognise Bangladesh's independence — has long shared strong ties with Dhaka. Anwar's visit reinforced that bond, offering both encouragement and partnership as Bangladesh navigates its challenges.

One of the most powerful moments of Anwar's visit came during his speech when he accepted the honorary doctorate conferred on him by Islamabad's National University of Sciences and Technology. Invoking Pakistan's great poet-philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal, Anwar made a rallying call for a renewal of the Muslim world.

The ummah, he argued, must rise above its divisions and embrace Iqbal's vision of intellectual self-reformation and societal progress. Anwar contends that Iqbal's conception of the principle of *ijtihad* represents a departure from the fiqh-bound legalistic approach, opening up this doctrine to new vistas for reform and renewal, i.e. *islah* and *tajdid*.

Anwar's call for *ijtihad* was a plea for the Muslim world to find a balance between faith and modernity, tradition and progress. Anwar's message was clear: the Muslim world must move forward.

Ultimately, these visits were strategic moves to build deeper, more meaningful relationships. While the real gains from these partnerships may not be immediately visible, there's no reason to doubt that the future potential could be enormous. In any event, Anwar's charisma demonstrates Malaysia's soft power in the region, and that already is a win.

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