

PM: HSR project can be revived

Major private sector backing needed to realise goal

By **RAHIMY RAHIM**
and **TARENCE TAN**
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

PUTRAJAYA: The revival of the proposed Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High-Speed Rail (HSR) project is only possible if there is major participation from the private sector, says Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

According to the Prime Minister, this was because the government has more pressing priorities presently, such as addressing poverty, flood mitigation, education, basic infrastructure and healthcare, among others, thus putting all national mega projects on hold.

"That will be our priority for the next two years. So, mega projects have to be deferred because of our commitment to settle some outstanding issues. We are also still waiting for some promising and positive contribution from the private sector to proceed.

"There have been proposals. But, it will only happen if we have full participation of the private sector, with very minimal government involvement," said Anwar, who was hosting Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong at the 11th Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat.

Wong, who spoke earlier at the press conference, said it was unfortunate that the original HSR project could not proceed.

"But, we are open to listening to new proposals from the Malaysian side, starting from a clean slate.

"From our point of view, greater connectivity between the two countries is always a plus,"

he said.

The HSR project was formally agreed between Malaysia and Singapore in February 2013, and was originally scheduled for completion by 2026.

The 350km rail line was designed to link Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Negri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor, before terminating at Singapore's Jurong East.

Following the change in the Federal Government in May 2018, the project was put on hold in September that year over concerns about the cost.

The HSR project was formally terminated in 2021 after both countries failed to agree on changes proposed by Malaysia.

As a result, in March 2021, Malaysia paid RM320.27mil to Singapore as compensation for the project's cancellation.

On July 20 last year, Transport Minister Anthony Loke said negotiations with Singapore on the revived HSR project can only start after the Cabinet makes a decision on its feasibility, which some estimate putting the cost at RM100bil, by the end of 2024.

In its original iteration, the HSR project aims to slash non-stop travel time between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore to just 90 minutes, making it extremely competitive over flying.

The same alignment will also allow quick travel within Malaysia, as the distance between Iskandar Puteri and Kuala Lumpur could be bridged within 120 minutes by a limited-stop service.

Alternatively, it can also allow Seremban residents to reach

Kuala Lumpur in not more than 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, Wong said Singapore supports Malaysia's chairmanship of Asean this year, as it is even more important now for the 11-member regional grouping to be more integrated and united.

"The greater competition we face now is between us in Asean and outside this region. Everyone is trying to anchor major projects now, where the big economies are talking about re-shoring, on-shoring, near-shoring - they want big projects to be near to them.

"So, Asean has to come together to look at ways on enhancing our value proposition and be competitive together," he said.

Wong said Malaysia and Singapore can form an important foundation for a stronger Asean, and that is why the announcement of the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone is a crucial building block to a more integrated Asean.

"We hope that with Malaysia's stewardship, we can make good progress," he added.

Commenting on Asean, Anwar said he agreed with Wong that emphasis should be placed on the Asean grouping this year.

"The main focus is on the importance of strengthening our fundamentals as a region and strategic position to address new players and the new uncertain geopolitical demands," he added.

Malaysia assumed the Asean chairmanship on Jan 1 and unveiled the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability" as a reflection of the country's aspirations to foster a unified and prosperous Asean.

Timeline of the HSR project from 2010 until present

2010

The concept of a high-speed rail link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore is introduced as part of Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme, aiming to enhance economic dynamism and livability in Kuala Lumpur.

February 19, 2013

During the Singapore-Malaysia Leaders' Retreat, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak agreed to develop the HSR project.

July 19, 2016

Both governments sign a Memorandum of Understanding to develop the HSR, targeting operations to commence by Dec 31, 2026.

December 13, 2016

A legally binding bilateral agreement is signed, formalising the project's technical, regulatory and financial frameworks.

February 16, 2017

A consortium is awarded the joint development partner contract to provide project management support and technical advice.

May 28, 2018

Following a change in Malaysia's government, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced the cancellation of the HSR project, citing high costs estimated at RM110bil and minimal financial returns.

June 11, 2018

Dr Mahathir clarified that the project is temporarily shelved due to financial constraints, indicating a possibility of future revival.

September 5, 2018

Malaysia and Singapore agreed to postpone the HSR project until May 31, 2020, with Malaysia compensating Singapore S\$15mil (RM46.2mil) for costs incurred to suspend the project. The new targeted operations commencement

date is set for Jan 1, 2031.

May 31, 2020

Singapore agreed to Malaysia's request for a further suspension of the HSR project until Dec 31, 2020, due to an economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Malaysia requested a seven-month extension for both sides to discuss and assess Malaysia's proposed changes to the project.

Jan 1, 2021

The HSR project is officially terminated after both countries failed to reach an agreement on proposed changes by Malaysia before the deadline of Dec 31, 2020. Malaysia agreed to compensate Singapore for costs incurred.

July 18, 2024

Transport Minister Anthony Loke said Malaysia is shortlisting proposals for a high-speed rail link between the capital here and Singapore and should decide if it will proceed with the multibillion-dollar project by the year end.

July 20, 2024

Loke said negotiations with Singapore on the HSR project can only start after the Cabinet makes a policy decision on the feasibility of the RM100bil project by the year end.

Jan 7, 2025

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong expressed openness to reviving the HSR project, emphasising that any new proposal should involve full private sector participation.

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