

## SPECIAL REPORT

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LOW YEN YEING/THE EDGE



# Anwar looks ahead to GE16

At the halfway point of his five-year term, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is being criticised by many of those who supported him during his years in the Opposition, citing his failure to initiate institutional reforms. Those close to PMX say he has to prioritise appeasing the larger base who did not vote for him in GE15 to win the next general election.

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**W**e are now halfway through the unity/Madani government of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. To understand some of the major policy decisions made and why some election promises have not been implemented — currently hot topics of debate among Malaysians — it is necessary to look back at a few key statistics on how the voting went in November 2022.

Among them:

- Anwar's Pakatan Harapan (PH) finished third in the parliamentary seat of Putrajaya, behind Perikatan Nasional (PN) and Barisan Nasional (BN). Bersatu vice-president Datuk Dr Radzi Jidin, who contested as a PN candidate, won in a six-cornered fight with a majority of 2,310 votes. He obtained 16,002 votes to beat four-term Putrajaya incumbent, Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor of BN/Umno, who received 13,692 votes. Dr Noraishah Mydin Abdul Aziz of PH/PKR obtained only 5,988 votes.

This means that although Anwar ended up as PM after the 15th general election (GE15), his coalition (PH) and party (PKR) managed to garner only 14% of the votes in Putrajaya — the seat of the federal government. Putrajaya's significance is that its voters are not just primarily Malays but also civil servants. The result more or less mirrored how Malay votes went nationwide. According to various estimates, PH obtained less than 20%, trailing behind PN (50%) and BN (30%).

- Seat-wise, PKR itself contested in 71 constituencies in the peninsula and won 29. It also won two seats in Sabah and Sarawak. Of the 29 seats in the peninsula, 21 had a non-Malay majority. Of the 49 Malay majority seats it contested, it won only eight. This means that the total number of 82 seats won then by PH (including MUDA) and PKR in GE15 were primarily the result of the overwhelming support (estimated at 80%) of non-Malay voters, especially in the semi-urban and urban constituencies. They are made up mostly of middle to upper middle-class Malaysians.

## Priority to court those who didn't vote for PH

Given this data, one would expect Anwar's government to enact policies that would "reward" those who voted for PH. But the opposite has happened in the past 30 months as his government sought to woo those who didn't vote for it in GE15.

Here are some of what the Madani government has implemented:

- A hefty wage hike for civil servants from November this year, a move that will cost taxpayers an additional RM10 billion a year. There are around 1.7 million civil servants — an important vote bank that Anwar wants to win over.
- Launch of the Kota Madani smart city in Putrajaya to provide homes for 10,000 civil servants at an estimated cost of RM4 billion.
- Increase in direct cash aid for the B40 group to RM13 billion this year, from RM10 billion in 2024. This benefits nine million recipients or 60% of the adult population. For context, Malaysia has around 22 million registered voters, of which 60% are Malay/bumiputera, 10% non-Malay bumiputera, 25% Chinese and the rest Indians and others.

## Funding civil service wage hikes and cash aid

To give Anwar's government credit, it has implemented two important financial reforms that had been talked about for many years but never carried out by previous governments.

- Since January 2024, new civil servants are no longer put under the government pension scheme. Instead, they and the government will contribute to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) like all private employees. The pension scheme was a major burden on government finances, and economists had warned that it was not sustainable. Although there will not be any immediate financial relief, it was an important move for the long term.
- Parliament passed the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) and it was gazetted in February 2024. Under the FRA, government debt cannot exceed 60% of gross domestic product (GDP) without approval by parliament. It is currently at 64% of GDP.
- Anwar, who is also finance minister, wants to lower the government's budget deficit to 3.5% this year from 4.1% in 2024.

## Where the bulk of government savings of more than RM20 bil is going

ITEM	BUDGET 2024 (RM)	BUDGET 2025 (RM)	INCREASE (RM)
Cash aid under Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah including Sumbangan Asas Rahmah	10.0 bil	13.0 bil	3.0 bil
Allocation for Welfare Department	2.4 bil	2.9 bil	500 mil
Inisiatif Payung Rahmah and Jualan Rahmah programmes	200 mil	1.0 bil	800 mil
Civil servants' salary increase	99.8 bil	105.9 bil	6.1 bil
Pension increase for government retirees	34.4 bil	40.5 bil	6.1 bil
Subsidies and incentives for farmers and fishermen	2.5 bil	2.6 bil	100 mil
School education scholarships and aid	0	500 mil	500 mil
Special grants for Sabah and Sarawak	600 mil	1.2 bil	600 mil
Bridges and roads	3.7 bil	4.4 bil	700 mil
Health services in rural areas	100 mil	555 mil	450 mil

Note: This list is not exhaustive and reflects selected key allocations announced so far.

It targets achieving 3.0% by 2027. Such fiscal discipline is important to protect the value of the ringgit and the rating of government debt.

But how is Anwar paying civil servants more and boosting cash aid to the B40 and, at the same time, reducing the budget deficit? How is he funding the billions in additional expenses?

The two measures taken are:

- Subsidy rationalisation, especially for fuel, which is expected to save RM8.0 billion a year.
  - Expansion of the sales and services tax (SST) from July 1 this year. This will bring in an estimated RM10 billion more in revenue a year, equivalent to the additional annual salaries of civil servants. While everyone has to pay SST, exemptions are given to basic necessities, thus shielding the B40, who will also be receiving RM13 billion in cash aid.
- Those who end up having to fund additional expenses are the group Anwar labels as the Maha Kaya — many of whom voted for PH in GE15.

## Why political reforms have to take a back seat

The prime minister, who turns 78 next month, is well aware of the criticisms of his steward-

ship of the country, especially with regards to institutional reforms. But to the seasoned politician, fiscal reforms like the SST and targeted subsidies that benefit the masses are more important than pleasing the elite and non-governmental organisations who are clamouring for institutional reforms.

Economist and head of Khazanah Research Institute Nungsari Ahmad Radhi describes the conversation on institutional reforms as something that "goes over the head" because of PKR's minority position in government.

"Post-elections, the government is made up of a coalition of parties that have been on both sides of the fence ... the tensions and trade-offs to go through. The PM represents a party with 31 seats in a government coalition of 153 seats.

"Using that perspective, this government has done well in sequencing and prioritising policies. Fiscal consolidation — which is a painful exercise — gets priority. And much necessary painful stuff gets done. No kicking the can down the road. It can land on anyone down the road," he says.

Nungsari, who is one of the four members of the government's Policy Advisory Committee, says people may quibble over degrees of reform but most agree with the qualitative emphasis.

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PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, THE EDGE REPORTING AND ANALYSIS

## Key reforms and initiatives

KEY REFORMS AND INITIATIVES THAT HAVE BEEN IMPLEMENTED	DESCRIPTION
Public Finance and Fiscal Responsibility Act 2023 [Act 850]	Caps government financial guarantees at 25% of GDP and mandates that all fiscal targets — including debt ceilings and minimum development expenditure — must be tabled and approved by Parliament. Fiscal deficit target of 3.5% of GDP by 2026. Limits unilateral powers of the finance minister, which effectively prevents another 1MDB-type fiasco.
Diesel subsidy rationalisation and BUDI MADANI programme	Effective from June 10, 2024, blanket diesel subsidies in Peninsular Malaysia were removed. Targeted aid via the Subsidised Diesel Control System (SKDS) 2.0, BUDI Individual and BUDI Agro-Commodity programmes were put in place. More than 140,000 individuals and 111,523 logistics companies receive monthly cash aid and price controls respectively. Government saves RM4 billion to RM6 billion annually.
Adjustment of the Public Service Remuneration Scheme	Effective from December 2024, civil servants receive phased salary increases: 15% for support and professional groups, 7% for top management. Full adjustment (by January 2026) will raise incomes by 16.8% to 42.7% for 1.6 million civil servants.
RM1,700 Minimum Wage Order and Progressive Wage Policy	Minimum wage raised to RM1,700 a month from February 2025 (August 2025 for micro employers). Progressive Wage Policy, due to start in 2025, gives employers cash incentives for salary increases based on productivity and training. Median monthly income rose from RM2,500 (November 2022) to RM3,045 (December 2024).
Constitutional amendment — citizenship rights for children born abroad	March 2025 amendment to Article 14(1)(b) of the Federal Constitution grants automatic citizenship to children born overseas, to Malaysian mothers
National Energy Transition Roadmap (NETR)	Launched in August 2023 to drive 10 flagship projects in renewable energy, green hydrogen, CCUS (carbon capture, utilisation and storage) and mobility. RM60.7 billion investment expected to create 84,500 jobs and reduce 24,264 gigagrams of carbon dioxide annually, supporting 2050 net-zero goal.
New Industrial Master Plan 2030 (NIMP 2030)	A seven-year strategy that boosted 2024 manufacturing value-added by 4.1%, and accelerates automation, circular economy and EV ecosystem. Initiatives such as Smart Tech-Up and CCUS pilots support high-tech industrial growth.
Parliamentary Services Act 2025	Restores Parliament's administrative, financial and HR autonomy (revoked in 1993). Strengthens separation of powers, legislative budget oversight and Parliament's role in checking the Executive.
Abolition of Mandatory Death Penalty Act 2023	Enacted on July 4, 2023, the Act abolishes mandatory death/life sentences. Judges gain discretion, with emphasis on rehabilitation.
Audit Act 1957 Amendment	Amendment in 2024 expands audit coverage to 1,856 GLCs and government-guaranteed entities. Introduces digital audit tools and Accounting Fraud Task Force to enhance detection of financial mismanagement.
Mandatory open tender and Government Procurement Bill	From November 2022, all government procurements are required to go through open tenders to curb cronyism. The Ministry of Finance is drafting a Government Procurement Bill (to be tabled in 2025) that defines powers, processes and accountability mechanisms, making procurement transparency legally binding across administrations.
Civil servant pension scheme reform	In January 2024, the government ended the traditional pension scheme for new civil servants, shifting them to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) system. Under the new scheme, both employees and the government contribute to the EPF, similar to private sector practices. This reform aims to address the unsustainable rise in pension liabilities, which many economists had warned was a "time bomb" for public finances.
Urban Renewal Act	A proposed law to enable redevelopment of ageing urban areas without requiring unanimous consent from all property owners, using a threshold based on a building's age and condition. Aims to address dilapidation and poor infrastructure. Expected to be tabled in the July 2025 parliamentary sitting.

He acknowledges the demand for more institutional reforms. "Yes, there are loud calls for institutional reforms, which have been quite a bit, but they are related to fiscal reforms. The fiscal reforms are prioritised to ensure the government has the resources and fiscal space to also address the safety net issues and the inequality issues."

Anwar leads a fragile unity government made up of at least 24 parties. The party with the biggest number of seats in the coalition is DAP. Apart from the DAP, Anwar has to appease BN. Without BN's 26 seats, he would not have garnered the majority support in parliament to become the prime minister in November 2022.

However, BN is led by Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who faced multiple corruption charges. The Attorney General's Chambers opted to discontinue the case last year. Another controversial leader who found a new lease of life under Anwar's regime is the

present governor of Sabah, Tun Musa Aman.

After the 2018 general elections, when he was ousted as chief minister of Sabah, Musa was charged with 46 counts of corruption. All charges were dropped in 2020. Musa was out of politics until his appointment as governor in January this year. The appointment is viewed as a move to check the influence of Datuk Seri Mohd Shafie Apdal's Warisan in the upcoming Sabah state elections.

**PKR's Malay dilemma**

In the last general elections in 2022, PKR's influence in Malay-majority seats dwindled significantly. The party did not win any parliamentary seats in the Malay belt states of Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. It only won one parliamentary seat — out of 15 — in Kedah.

Even in Anwar's safe seat of Permatang Pauh where his daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar was fielded, PKR lost to a candidate from PAS.

KEY REFORMS YET TO BE IMPLEMENTED	DESCRIPTION
Two-term limit for prime minister	The bill to limit the term of the prime minister to two terms was tabled in December 2019 for first reading, during which Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was the PM. It was reported to have been withdrawn in August 2020 when Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was PM. DAP has proposed for the law to be enacted within the next two years.
Separation of roles between prime minister and finance minister	It was a practice begun in the late 1990s when Dr Mahathir was PM. Since then, PMs have tended to double as finance minister to have better control over government coffers. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim currently holds both positions, raising concerns over too much power in the hands of one person and undermining reform efforts to strengthen checks and balances in governance.
Separation of Attorney-General's advisory and prosecutorial roles	Reform proposal aims to split the AG's dual role to ensure prosecutorial independence and impartiality. Awaiting formal study or legislation.
Political Financing Act	Long-awaited reform to regulate political donations, reduce undue influence and increase transparency. No clear progress on draft bill.
Press freedom and civil liberties	Ongoing use of Sedition Act and media restrictions raises concerns. Advocates call for stronger legal protections and institutional safeguards for speech and civil rights.
MACC Chief Commissioner appointment reform	PH proposed that the nomination of the MACC Chief Commissioner must be vetted by a bipartisan Parliamentary Special Committee. This has not been done. In fact, Chief Commissioner Tan Sri Azam Baki's tenure has been extended twice.
Fixed Parliament Term Act	A fixed term was proposed to prevent sudden dissolutions of Parliament or State Legislative Assemblies before the end of their five-year term. The aim is to reduce political instability, which undermines investor confidence and economic stability. Anwar said he does not see the enactment of the law as a priority for the government now.
Equal constituency allocation	Equal allocation of Constituency Development Funds to all MPs, regardless of party affiliation. While Anwar said that he agreed in principle to give an equal allocation to opposition MPs, they must first set up a meeting to negotiate and 'discuss their allocations'.

Note: This list is not exhaustive and reflects selected key reforms and initiatives announced so far

PATRICK GOH/THE EDGE



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The fact that PKR does not have a representative from the Malay heartland puts the party in a difficult situation as a champion of the Malay cause.

Nungsari feels that Anwar cannot bring the country forward without solving the problems of the Malays. "I believe the PM himself is doing alright among all voters, including Malay voters. Of course, there is a stronger preponderance of that support among the lower half than the upper quartile. Perhaps it is a reflection of his focus on 'roti dan nasi'

issues at this juncture. Not that he is not focusing on growth and investments, which he tirelessly does, but that's the perception."

The prime minister's change in priorities to bread and butter issues is a stark contrast to when the Reformasi movement started in 1998. Anwar was arrested, thrown in prison without bail and subsequently jailed for a total of 15 years. He was released only in 2004 after the Federal Court overturned his conviction.

His supporters then were mainly the urban crowd and some segments of the rural Malays. A battery of lawyers provided legal service to Anwar and he was not short of supporters from the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that helped mobilise thousands of people for gatherings of protest.

For the lawyers and NGOs, institutional reforms such as having independent enforcement agencies and a judiciary free of any political interference are key to protecting the system. Their objectives were in sync with the Reformasi movement.

But an aide to Anwar says the traditional support from urban crowds and NGOs is not translating into the much-needed popular votes needed for PKR to win seats.

"The currency of politics is the seats in parliament. If this trend continues, PKR may not be relevant in the next general elections. So, before we can talk about institutional reforms, Anwar has to solidify the position of PKR by ensuring that it wins more seats," says the aide.

That is why Anwar has expanded and increased the financial handouts. Essentially, 60% of the adult population now receives some form of direct financial assistance from the government every month. The amount is expected to increase in the next two years as the general elections draw closer.

In short, Anwar is betting that the wage hike he has given civil servants and the billions in additional cash aid he is providing to those who did not vote for PH/PKR in GE15 will carry him to victory in GE16 — even if he risks upsetting his traditional vote bank (the avocado eaters) by making them pay higher taxes.

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## Anwar struggles with institutional reforms

At the mid-point of his premiership, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim finds himself struggling not just to deliver institutional reform pledges, but also to manage the unity government.

Simply put, his government is a coalition of coalitions that came together by necessity, not ideology. These are the number of seats held by members of the unity government:

- The Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition Anwar leads has 81 parliamentary seats now, of which Anwar's PKR has 31, the DAP (40), Amanah (eight) and UPKO (two);
- Barisan Nasional (BN) has 30 MPs. They comprise 26 from Umno, two from MCA and one each from MIC and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah;
- Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) has 23 MPs; and
- Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) has six MPs.

In short, because his PKR party and his coalition PH have to depend on coalitions like BN, GRS and GPS that they contested against in the 15th general election (GE15), Anwar's time in office so far has been defined less by sweeping institutional changes and more by strategic compromises.

When he came to power in November 2022, expectations were high for deep institutional reforms. But since then, as reality set in, nothing has happened with the more challenging ones.

"Political reforms have moved slightly, with the passing of the Parliamentary Services Act earlier this year," notes Aira Azhari, CEO of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS). The restoration of parliament's autonomy, lost since 1993, reinforces checks and balances within the Malaysian government.

Meanwhile, the abolition of the mandatory death penalty in 2023 and the decriminalisation of attempted suicide represent progressive strides towards human rights and mental health protection.

#### What remains undone

Yet, as with any government reliant on diverse political alliances, compromises have come at a cost. Crucial reforms remain stalled, mired in political sensitivities or resistance from the diverse parties within Anwar's unity government. (See "Key reforms yet to be implemented" in table on Page 57).

Notably, the two-term limit for prime ministers, initially tabled in 2019 under the previous PH government, remains unrealised. Also, the fact that Anwar is both prime minister and minister of finance has raised concerns that he has consolidated power excessively. This dual role, critics argue, contradicts the promised goal of strengthening governmental checks and balances.

In its GE15 manifesto, PH had also promised that the nomination of the chief commissioner of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) would be vetted by a bipartisan parliamentary committee. This has not happened as Anwar has in fact twice extended the tenure of Tan Sri Azam Baki, much to the disappointment of several PH supporters.

In fact, during the run-up to the PKR party elections, his daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar was quoted as saying that she would raise the matter with her father if she won. It is not clear if she has done so after defeating then economy minister Datuk Seri Mohd Rafizi Ramli.

In justifying the extension of Azam's tenure, the prime minister had cited the MACC chief commissioner's rare courage in going after corporate bigwigs.

Another unfulfilled GE15 pledge is the introduction of a Fixed Parliament Term Act. The Act was proposed to address uncertainty stemming from sudden dissolutions of parliament or state legislative assemblies before the end of their five-year terms. The Act, if implemented, would ensure that dissolutions only occur at the end of the term, thereby promoting political stability. So far, Anwar has said the enactment of the

law is not a priority for the government.

"The record on political reform is limited," states Prof Bridget Welsh of the University of Nottingham Malaysia, highlighting stalled efforts such as the Political Financing bill, which is designed to bring transparency to political donations and reduce undue influence. Despite draft efforts, substantial progress remains elusive.

Similarly, while the government has formed the media council, the jury is still out on whether it will promote press freedom or is just another layer of regulation that news organisations have to deal with. This is especially given that existing restrictive laws such as the Sedition Act 1948 still exists, with no real effort made towards its repeal and no significant legislative safeguards introduced to enhance media protections or civil liberties.

Furthermore, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 that requires a licence for publishing purposes is still in place.

The separation of the Attorney-General's advisory and prosecutorial roles is another critical institutional reform languishing in the planning stages. Such separation is vital for ensuring impartiality and independence in Malaysia's judicial system, yet has still not been finalised pending formal study and legislative action.

#### The cost of political alliances

Anwar's reliance on powerful political allies, particularly Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and influential Sabah leader Tun Musa Aman, has complicated public perception of his reformist credentials.

In many ways, Anwar appears to be caught between a rock and a hard place — trying to maintain a fragile coalition while preserving the integrity of his reform promises.

"Both the appointment [as the deputy prime minister] and the discharge not amounting to an acquittal (DNAA) for Za-

hid have served to reinforce the view that the Anwar government is focused on political survival, rather than reform," Welsh argues.

Compounding these challenges is Anwar's unity government dynamics. While internal pressures from PH partners like DAP and Amanah appear manageable, greater constraints emerge from BN and GPS.

"Bigger consideration needs to be given to PH's other partners in the coalition, namely BN and GPS. Demands from within PH seem to be managed better, or rather, are not as consequential," notes Aira.

Welsh, on the other hand, argues that the PH partners have not been effective advocates for political reform in government. "A good example of this is the call for the Chief Justice extension at the last minute [by DAP] — too little, too late," she says.

#### Eyeing the next election

Looking ahead, Anwar's strategic shift towards wooing the semi-rural and B40 voters who did not vote for him in GE15 raises questions about his long-term electoral prospects. According to Welsh, "This focus has had limited impact to date due to the rising cost of living, and an inability to win over PAS' traditional rural/semi-rural political base."

With critical state polls approaching in Sabah and Melaka, Anwar's political future and the sustainability of his coalition depend heavily on his ability to balance effective governance and political survival.

"Increasingly, the question being asked is whether Anwar Ibrahim was a reformer at all, as more than halfway into his term, there is little substance to point to, especially political reforms. Many question whether reform was a means to attain power rather than the end in itself," Welsh says.

As Anwar navigates the second half of his term, which ends in December 2027, he faces a dual imperative: solidify a credible legacy of reform or risk becoming a cautionary tale of unfulfilled promises amid political compromises. **E**

## 'Free man' Rafizi will be big thorn in Anwar's side

Things have come full circle for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. During the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) congress in Johor in May, the fallout between Anwar and his then deputy Datuk Seri Mohd Rafizi Ramli became crystal clear when Rafizi walked past Anwar on stage without shaking his hand.

By then, Rafizi had already lost his post as deputy president in the party election to Nurul Izzah Anwar. Rafizi has since resigned as the economy minister and has started criticising Anwar.

Let's turn the clock back to the 1998 Merdeka Day celebrations. Anwar was then deputy to prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. On the stage where the cabinet ministers were seated, Anwar did not sit with Mahathir and did not shake his hand.

The rift between the two was apparent. Two days later on Sept 2, Anwar was sacked as deputy prime minister and subsequently expelled from Umno. The day before the sacking, Mahathir had imposed capital controls.

Following that, he launched the Reformasi movement that captured the imagination of many, including a young Rafizi and others such as Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad who also lost in the recent PKR elections and resigned as



At a press conference on July 7, Rafizi (centre), flanked by Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad and Wong Chen, called for an RCI on judicial appointments

minister of natural resources and environmental sustainability.

The movement called for reforms that included combating corruption and cronyism, and instilling independence in the judiciary.

As PM, Anwar now faces the same demands, not just from the Opposition but also from what is emerging as an opposition caucus within PKR.

On July 7, a group of nine PKR lawmakers led by Rafizi called for a Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) to investigate allegations surrounding judicial appointments.

"Defending the independence of the judiciary is a core pillar of PKR's and Pakatan Harapan's struggle," the joint statement by the nine members of parliament (MPs) said.

Political analysts say the fact that the PKR

MPs (representing almost a third of the 31 PKR MPs) aligned to Rafizi questioned the appointments of senior judges so strongly is a direct challenge to Anwar. It suggests that they will continue to speak out on the shortcomings of the unity government over the remaining term of the current parliament.

Rafizi and his group, they say, will position themselves as the real reformists in PKR.

On July 10, Rafizi took it one step further by writing a letter to all MPs inviting them to a forum on the judiciary and calling them to support the setting up of the RCI.

In the letter, he also called on the MPs to support the Parliamentary Special Select Committee for human rights, elections and institutional reforms in probing into the brewing judicial issue, including summoning Anwar to give a statement to the committee.

Additionally, he encouraged all MPs to support filling key judicial vacancies based on the Judicial Appointments Commission's prior recommendations.

"Rafizi and the eight MPs know they will be axed as candidates in GE16, which means they are going to be a pain to the PM from now," says one political observer.

The question is, how much of a pain will they be and how much Anwar will tolerate. **E**