

JOCELINE TAN



Analysis

How is the PM doing so far?

Despite the wave of discontent among the common folk over a string of issues, Anwar is still the people's leading choice going by his 55% approval rating in a recent survey.

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THE mid-term is always challenging for any leader in power.

That is when the euphoria over a new government starts to fade, the breath of fresh air turns stale and optimism about promises of change begins to falter.

"It happens to governments all over the world. Voters expect results by the half-way point and that is usually when the ratings fall from the peak," said lawyer and political commentator Ivanpal S. Grewal.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had an approval rating of 61% when he came in as Prime Minister in December 2022. It slid to a low of 43% in June last year around the time of the diesel subsidy cut, but climbed back to 55% in May according to the Merdeka Centre survey.

"The majority of people feel the country is stable under the unity government but we also recognise what the survey is saying. People are concerned about the economy and we intend to address those concerns," said the Prime Minister's chief political secretary Datuk Seri Shamsul Iskandar Md Akin.

Anwar's popularity, said Ivanpal, is resilient despite the rumbblings over the slew of issues ranging from the sales and services tax (SST) to questions about appointments to the judiciary.

Social media in the past week has been choked with critical commentary about the expanded

SST, which came into effect on July 1. The consternation is reminiscent of when the GST or the goods and services tax was introduced back in 2015.

Being in power is wonderful but it is like living in a big house on top of the hill where everyone can take potshots at you.

The Prime Minister's overseas trip just as the SST came into effect did not sit well with people and it has been politicised to the hilt with memes and caricatures popping up on social media.

The backlash has been quite acute and his team may need to rethink the frequent overseas visits. Some have even taken to the Facebook page of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to let off steam about the government.

"When the PM travels, he raises the country's profile and brings in investments. The PM has a lot on his plate, give him space for the plans to bear fruit. The effects of foreign investment will be felt soon," said Shamsul.

There are also questions about the Merdeka Centre survey, asking why the Prime Minister's popularity is so high if 50% of those surveyed think the country is going in the wrong direction.

The thing is that although many are dissatisfied about the state of the economy, Anwar remains the only viable choice of leader for now.

The PAS-led opposition is still unable to convince the majority

of Malaysians that they can do a better job than the regime it is trying to topple.

The other interesting thing is that the opposition is unable to challenge his numbers in Parliament and he has been able to hold together his coalition of strange bedfellows.

Anwar's government looks remarkably steady despite the dust storm billowing around him.

He also seems to have the King on his side. Both of them have developed an agreeable working relationship.

It gives Anwar immense clout because we have seen how things go downhill if the monarch and the prime minister of the day are not on the same page.

However, there is a defined silence among Umno leaders who have not bothered to defend the SST. The Umno side is enjoying the dilemma that Pakatan Harapan politicians are going through over the SST.

Umno politicians feel vindicated because Pakatan leaders had exploited public sentiment about the GST to topple the Barisan Nasional government.

Some have disseminated videos mocking Wanita DAP leader Teo Nie Ching who made a spectacle of herself singing the "ABCD-GST" jingle 'in coffeeshops and comments like "padan muka" (serves you right) are apparent in their chat groups.

Others in Umno who still

remember how Pakatan supporters used foul language and stepped on pictures of their leaders have a sense of déjà vu on seeing street protestors torch images of the Prime Minister.

It would be hypocritical if Pakatan leaders were to condemn such behaviour because they were the pioneers of street democracy.

According to Ivanpal, the Prime Minister's favourable approval rating gives him a cushion and the breathing space to move ahead with his policies.

"How the PM moves forward from here will determine if he can survive beyond the next general election. Can he pull out of it? Will people accept the economic reforms as necessary to secure our fiscal future?" said Ivanpal.

The Prime Minister has to move into high gear because he has only two more years to push his agenda.

"He has to deliver political reform and restore his reformist image to retain the urban base. That would include promises such as freeing up the judiciary and separating the Attorney General's Chambers and the public prosecution arm.

"He also needs to charm the Malay base. This could be done via the 13th Malaysia Plan to provide something for everybody. He can make it a vision document to take his Madani framework forward," said Ivanpal.

Analysts cannot understand

why he has not appointed someone credible to fill the Economy Ministry. There are doubts that Finance Minister II Datuk Seri Amir Hamzah Azizan, tasked to oversee the Economy Ministry, can tackle two ministries effectively.

If the Prime Minister is short of talent from his own party, he should bring in an experienced professional outside. Someone like Khairy Jamaluddin would have been perfect for the task.

"The danger sign is that for the first time, Malays and non-Malays seem equally unhappy," said a Kelantan Umno Youth politician.

Meanwhile, the professional chattering class are keeping a critical eye on who will be appointed the next Chief Justice. The optics and speculation surrounding the judicial appointment are not good for Anwar's reform agenda.

Anwar has been likened to a cat with nine lives, almost as immortal as his nemesis Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The next two years will present the ultimate test to his survival skills.

The ever witty Umno supreme council member Datuk Seri Alwi Che Ahmad put it this way: "Anwar's cooking smells inviting. The pot is on the stove but we are still waiting for the food. Will the food be ready before people grow too hungry?"

The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own