

STRATEGIC PARTNER

PM'S AFRICAN VISIT OPENS VAST MARKETS

It's a hedge against over-reliance on regions like China, US and Europe

NAIROBI

THE Hayli Gubbi Volcano, located in the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, erupted for the

first time in at least 12,000 years, exactly five days after the Malaysian delegation comprising Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, two ministers, a high-level business group and a number of journalists left the country.

It was the first time a serving Malaysian prime minister had set foot on Ethiopian soil and what a bang the visit created — not only for the Ethiopians who pulled out all the stops to greet the visiting delegation, but also Malaysia which is hoping to use the country as a stepping stone into the African continent.

The historical significance was not lost on the hosts as Anwar's chartered plane landed at the Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa last Tuesday.

The landmark visit was for Malaysia to intensify engagements with African countries by touching base with them beginning from the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopians did not hold back laying out the red carpet — or in this case a yellow, flowery one — as they celebrated the Malaysians.

Why yellow and not red? There is an interesting story behind this.

In Ethiopia, dignitaries are accorded a yellow carpet treatment instead of the usual red.

Apparently, this tradition in Ethiopia dates back to June 2021 when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed proposed changes to the reception of guests in the Eastern African country.

At that time, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner believed that Ethiopia needed to utilise its heritage in welcoming guests instead of relying on the colonialist's version, so Abiy proposed the use of adey abeba carpets instead.



SHARANJIT SINGH

Adey abeba is a common flower in Ethiopia, often found on mountain slopes. It is yellow and has a blend of green leaves, hence the yellow green theme of the welcoming carpet for VIPs.

Apart from meeting Abiy, President Taye Atske Selassie and African Union Commission chairperson Mahmoud Ali Yousof, Anwar also attended a business forum before zooming off to Johannesburg for the G20 Leaders' Summit at the invitation of President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Anwar then headed to Nairobi, Kenya where he received a 19-gun salute at the imposing White House-like official residence of Kenyan President William Samoei Ruto.

The leaders met for a good two hours and later emerged to announce that the trade tariffs between both countries would be scrapped, while relations with Kenya — regarded as the rising star of Africa — would be elevated to that of a strategic partnership.

WHY AFRICA AND WHY NOW

From a Malaysian perspective, Anwar's African tour should not be seen as a mere junket or a vanity exercise of photo ops!

All three economies — Ethiopia, South Africa and Kenya — are seen as fast-growing African hubs with links to the wider African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) market of 1.4 billion people.

For Malaysia, that's a hedge against over-concentration on regions like China, the United States or Europe.

MALAYSIA-KENYA HIGH LEVEL BUSINESS FORUM

In Conjunction with the Official Visit of
The Honourable Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia
to the Republic of Kenya

24th November 2025 | Villa Rosa Kempinski, Nairobi

Jointly Organised by:



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim speaking at the Malaysia-Kenya High Level Business Forum during his official visit to Nairobi, Kenya, on Monday. Also present are Investment, Trade and Industry Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Federal Territories) Datuk Seri Dr Zaliha Mustafa. BERNAMA PIC

It fits the Madani government narrative of "buka pasaran baru" (opening new markets) and reducing vulnerability to great-power trade shocks. Anwar spoke at length on this in his press briefings throughout the tour.

Local analyst of global politics, business and economics, Samirul Ariff Othman said Anwar's African trip, the first by a Malaysian leader after almost two decades, also corrected a historical blind spot.

"Malaysia has long had comfort zones like Asean, Gulf and East Asia states as trading partners, while Africa was often framed as distant or risky.

"This is one of the few times a Malaysian prime minister treats Africa as a strategic, not charity, partner," he said.

Samirul, who is also a *New Straits Times* columnist and senior consultant with Global Asia Consulting, said the trip also linked Malaysia's Asean 2025 chairmanship with Africa's continental institutions and the G20.

He said this gave Malaysia more credibility when talking about debt relief, climate finance, technology gaps, and also Palestine — not as a lone voice, but as part of a broader Global South coalition.

CONCRETE GAINS AND IMPACT ON MALAYSIA

For Malaysia, the Ethiopia leg matters for a number of practical reasons:

- Air links and logistics: A new

air services agreement opens a pathway for better connectivity between Malaysia and East/West Africa, potentially via Addis Ababa's established aviation hub.

This is important if Malaysian trade and tourism to Africa are to scale beyond tiny numbers.

□ Islamic finance and banking expansion: Investment, Trade and Industry Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz, who was part of Anwar's delegation, explicitly described Ethiopia's liberalised financial market as a promising gateway for Malaysian banks, especially Islamic finance players.

"If even one major Malaysian bank secures a presence or partnership there, it opens a financial corridor into Africa for Malaysian capital and products," Samirul said.

The South Africa /G20 leg saw less immediate memorandums of understanding, but more strategic visibility.

It was Anwar bringing Asean's voice to the G20.

Anwar's last stopover in Nairobi saw the prime minister publicly praising Kenya's ambitious programme to build more than 150,000 housing units for low-income groups, framing it as an inspirational model for using state power to uplift the poor.

"That creates room for Malaysian construction, building materials, smart city and housing-finance expertise to plug into Kenyan or joint projects.

"The Malaysia-Africa Higher Education Forum held here also

creates a pipeline for African students, officials and professionals to see Malaysia as a regional education hub," he said, adding that this supports our universities and long-term influence as today's scholarship student could be tomorrow's minister or CEO in Africa.

All in all, Anwar's visit shows Malaysia's readiness to step out of its usual comfort zones and to treat Africa as a peer strategic partner.

"The real economic impact is possible, but not automatic. MoUs and business forums are the start, not the finish line.

"The measurable benefits for Malaysians — new contracts, jobs, student flows, bank profits — will depend on how aggressively institutions like Zafrul's (Investment, Trade and Industry) ministry, the Finance Ministry, the Higher Education Ministry and government linked companies follow up," Samirul said.

"It is also a case of whether Malaysian firms are willing to invest time and risk venturing into African markets and whether local African partners see Malaysia as a serious, long-term counterpart."

For ordinary Malaysians, the impact is in the medium term, not overnight. In the short term, this is mainly about positioning Malaysia as a bridge between Asean and Africa, and Anwar as a prime minister conducting active economic diplomacy.

In the medium term, even if a fraction of the opportunities in Islamic finance, construction, digital services, education and halal industry materialise, they could translate into export demand, overseas projects and higher-value jobs at home.

The writer is NST deputy group editor