

Prospects & Perspectives



With his appointment as the 10th prime minister of Malaysia, this will be an interesting time to observe how Anwar puts his words into action on the global debate about democracy versus autocracy. Whether Malaysia can emerge as a champion of democracy in the region remains to be seen.

Picture source: Anwar Ibrahim, December 1, 2022, *Twitter*, <<https://twitter.com/anwaribrahim/status/1598284328806813696>>.

Navigating Malaysia-China Relations Amid the Democracy vs Autocracy Debate Under Anwar Ibrahim

By Khoo Ying Hooi

News of Malaysia's long-time opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's election as Malaysia's 10th prime minister did not only make waves in the country but also worldwide. Anwar's election received extensive media coverage as it marks a comeback from the two occasions when he was head of state in the 1990s. The 15th General Election (GE15) took place on November 19, 2022, resulting in an unprecedented hung Parliament. Anwar's appointment, in many ways, is a highly emotional affair, especially for many of his supporters, who waited over two decades after he was ousted from the government for his comeback. Since then, he mainly played the role of opposition, except for a short stint in government from 2018-2020. The chanting of "Reformasi," or "reform," was loudly heard as he arrived for the press conference after he was sworn in as the 10th prime minister.

The appointment of Anwar is also significant at the regional level, as the Southeast Asia region witnesses democratic retrenchment, such as the ongoing turmoil in Myanmar, Hun Sen's prolonged administration in Cambodia, and the election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in the Philippines.

Anwar is facing a tough challenge at the national level, with the real test of running a unity government. His appointment has also attracted attention to how he will balance the great power rivalry in the region between the United States and China, which surrounds the debate of democracy vs autocracy, and strategic issues such as the economy and security.

High hopes for Anwar to champion democracy and human rights

Anwar has received various labels generally associated with democratic values, such as "anti-graft reformer" by the Washington Post and a "democracy icon" by CNN. Anwar had the image of a "reformist" and a pro-democracy figurehead for decades, and as someone with strong links with the West; as prime minister, what will his approach toward the region's democracy issues, especially with China, be?

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in the congratulatory statement to Anwar, described the GE15 as "a demonstration of the power of democracy" and reaffirmed the relationship of both countries that is rooted in close



economic, people-to-people, and security ties. “We look forward to deepening our friendship and cooperation based on shared democratic principles and respect for human rights and the rule of law,” Blinken said. “We remain committed to working with Malaysia to advance a free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific region.”

International rights groups have also generally welcomed Anwar’s appointment and pledged to prioritize democracy and human rights. Many are hopeful that Anwar will bring reforms and put Malaysia on the right track of democratization.

How will Anwar navigate Malaysia’s relationship with China?

Malaysia had generally maintained friendly bilateral relations with China, with some exceptions during the time of Mahathir, when he was the second-time prime minister for a short stint between 2018-2020.

In October 2022, Malaysia, as one of the 47 UN Human Rights Council members, abstained on a vote on whether the Council should debate alleged abuses of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in China’s north-western region of Xinjiang. Will this change under Anwar’s administration, and how will he navigate Malaysia’s relationship with China amid the pressure to strengthen democracy domestically and regionally, and to play a key role internationally, with the image of a leader who strives for democracy after years of suffering politically?

Before the GE15, in July 2022, Anwar shared his view about the great-power rivalry in the Asia Pacific in an exclusive interview with a Turkey portal, the *Anadolu Agency*. In the interview, he described Malaysia as a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality, adding that it would be unwise for Malaysia to take any side in global bloc politics, where China’s rise as an important actor should not be ignored. At the same time, there is also a need to continue the engagement with the West.

He was somehow consistent in his approach to China when asked a similar question during his maiden press conference after he was sworn in. Describing China as “pivotal,” he continued “I would not just leave it as it is, but need it to be enhanced [relationship with China]”. He recognizes the



geopolitical realities in Asia, acknowledging China's strategic importance while simultaneously stressing the need to enhance ties with the U.S.

We should also remember that Anwar visited Beijing in 2018, a move seen as an attempt to reconcile with China after Malaysia, under Mahathir, decided to review several major China-linked projects, including the cancellation of the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High-Speed Rail (HSR) and renegotiation of a contract on the China-financed East Coast Rail Link. China-Malaysia relations have seen some ups and downs in recent years. The project was resumed in 2019 after renegotiations with China and a price cut.

A day after Anwar was sworn in, Premier Li Keqiang, in a congratulatory message, reaffirmed the friendly bilateral relations between China and Malaysia. The statement emphasized that both sides have continuously consolidated political mutual trust and deepened mutually beneficial cooperation for the peace and prosperity of both countries and the region.

Under Anwar's administration, Malaysia's approach to China is expected to remain stable as Malaysia cannot dismiss out of hand China's critical role economically. While Anwar is known to have strong ties with Western leaders, for the time being, his approach to China is not expected to be antagonistic; instead, there will likely be efforts to ensure Malaysia is not being thrown in a tricky seat having to choose between the U.S. or China. He will nevertheless face international public pressure, especially regarding human rights issues.

In the past, Anwar has expressed concerns over Uyghur issues. Labelled as a reformist, it will be interesting to see if he will speak out on the Taiwan issue, China's human rights violations, and the dispute in the South China Sea in his new role. With his appointment as the 10th prime minister of Malaysia, this will be an interesting time to observe how Anwar puts his words into action on the global debate about democracy versus autocracy. This will undoubtedly be a delicate balancing act and a test for Anwar. Whether Malaysia can emerge as a champion of democracy in the region remains to be seen.

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