# Malaysia's Midterm Reckoning: Is Anwar's Unity Government Losing the Plot?

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It has been more than two years since Anwar Ibrahim came to power as Malaysia's tenth prime minister by leading a unity government. The last general election in November 2022 resulted in a hung parliament, with no coalition securing an outright majority. After days of intense politicking and negotiations, Anwar finally emerged as Prime Minister, marking the culmination of a two-decade struggle against the very regime and the people who he now governs alongside.

The contrast between the 2018 and 2022 elections were both stark and eerily similar. In 2018, there was an overwhelming sense of hope and exuberance when the Mahathir Mohamad-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) defeated Barisan Nasional (BN) for the first time in Malaysian history. Irony presented itself that the supposed agent of reform was also the man who had presided over Malaysia's earlier decades of centralized control. In 2022, with the formation of the BN-PH unity government causing confusion and hesitation, there was a renewed hope as the new government was to be led by the reformist Anwar Ibrahim. Many believed there was validity in the long championed reforms he affirmed; multiracial unity, institutional integrity, and democratic renewal.

The midterm reality, however, tells a different story. With the many flaws in Anwar's government over the past two years, there have been multiple blunders that have been stacked against him today. Internal frictions are mounting, with the government increasingly appearing to sabotage itself in comparison to being threatened by the opposition. Within Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), discontent has brewed following accusations of nepotism with Nurul Izzah Anwar getting tacit support for the deputy president position, and a party election that had left many dissatisfied and requiring Anwar to step in (*Bernama*, 2025). The call to "close ranks" may be coming too late, especially as two ministers aligned with the HIRUK (Hidupkan Idealisme Reformasi Dalam Ujian Kuasa) faction have since exited the cabinet. These developments raise uncomfortable questions about the future of Pakatan Harapan. Can Anwar, PKR, and PH secure a second term in the next election, or are we already witnessing the slow unraveling of the coalition?

From day one, the unity government has faced allegations of institutional inertia, civil service resistance, and potential "deep state" pushback. While these allegations remain largely unproven, the symbolic significance of Putrajaya, the administrative heart of the government, being won by Radzi Jidin from the opposition Perikatan Nasional should not be overlooked.

Since the election, frustration has grown over sluggish reforms; the cost of living being one of the most prominent. In 2025 alone, public sentiment over the long-delayed rationalization of the RON95 fuel subsidy put Anwar on the defensive. Economists may back this move as a path to long-term economic sustainability (Birruntha & Safian, 2025) but the opposition has exploited it, stirring sentiment of rising living costs. They claimed the same happened following diesel subsidy rationalization last year, despite evidence to the contrary (Yee, 2025), emphasising a narrative where the government does not care about ordinary Malaysians.
Another misstep would be the proceeding and implementation of the Sales and Services Tax (SST). Faced with mounting criticism, Anwar quoting "If the rich want to eat avocados, then they will need to pay a little more," (Muhammad, 2025), did not create fond attitudes: it was tone-deaf at a time when many Malaysians were pointing out that this taxation was going to affect local imports of fruits and vegetables that were staples in everyday consumption. Two years to the next election is not a long time, and Anwar must remember that 2018 did not happen overnight.

Anwar keeps reminding the public that this is not a Pakatan Harapan government. That sentiment though, is not taken kindly when the perception of political compromise is growing. Tengku Zafrul's decision to leave UMNO and join PKR has only deepened suspicions that PKR and UMNO are becoming increasingly intertwined, with Zahid reminding the need to maintain UMNO's cabinet quota. This cautions to what is said about PH's leverage, and what that means where most seats and the prime minister are from its own ranks, but a flaw when they cannot reign in their junior partner, UMNO. Anwar and the unity government may have resuscitated UMNO -a party that suffered electoral decline since 2018. By shielding UMNO, Anwar may have allowed it to rebrand itself as the defender of Malay interests within the current regime. In that process, Malay voters might drift back to UMNO while PH, once a reformist beacon, loses its identity through association with UMNO. What began as a democratic breakthrough in 2018 could end in reinforcing the very power structures it sought to dismantle. Parallels have been found in history with this predicament, in particular Japan's postwar experience. Their Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) maintained near-permanent rule by absorbing elites and co-opting challengers. This begs the question of whether a dominant-party system is inherently bad. Even if it does have the potential to provide stability, it can often come at the cost of dynamism, competition, and accountability.

All this contributes to rising voter apathy. Reform-minded PH supporters feel increasingly alienated, particularly over long-standing issues such as Zahid Hamidi's discharge not amounting to acquittal (DNAA), as well as more recent ones including Azam Baki continuing in a third term as MACC chief despite controversies like the ongoing Sabah graft scandal (Kaur, 2025). While these disenchanted voters may not shift to PN, their disillusionment could manifest as lower turnout in the next election. Meanwhile, conservative Malay voters disillusioned with PN's lacklustre opposition may realign with a rebranded UMNO, thereby legitimizing its resurgence despite past scandals like 1MDB. After all, Najib Razak has just received a DNAA for a RM 27 million money laundering case involving SRC International (Asyraf, 2025). In this political impasse, PH is stuck. It cannot push key reforms such as political financing laws, prime minister term limits, and reform to political appointments without risking friction with UMNO. Without these reforms PH risks losing its base altogether. It doesn't help that Anwar is embroiled in a legal battle with Yusoff Rawther's civil suit over allegations of sexual misconduct. Anwar's decision to seek immunity via the Federal Court as the case receives a temporary stay further raises questions by critics on Anwar's intention (Ng, 2025).

This midterm moment is therefore a litmus test for Anwar's leadership and resolve. It is not too late with a recent poll from Merdeka Centre showing that Anwar's approval rating has improved from 43 per cent in June 2024 to 55 per cent in May 2025 on the heels of political and economic stability (Gimino, 2025). What is needed now is further recalibration to avoid PKR resembling UMNO 2.0 and risks drifting into irrelevance. Meanwhile, UMNO is regaining strength quietly but steadily. With the uproar over the SST, it was Zahid Hamidi, Anwar's deputy from UMNO, who came out saying the government might review the tax on fruits such as apples and oranges (*Malay Mail*, 2025).

In the eye of the storm, will Anwar be remembered not as the reformer who changed Malaysia, but as the man who inadvertently resurrected the old order that the people dismantled in 2018? For PH and for Anwar, the time to act is now. Without bold moves, they risk becoming just another footnote in Malaysia's long and unfinished democratic journey.

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