WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE REFORMASI MOVEMENT NEEDS REFORMING – THE RISE OF RAFIZISM

Critical Analysis

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The Ideology That Should Not Exist

With a political philosophy named after a man who rejects hero-worship, Rafizism should not exist. Its originating figure, Rafizi Ramli, Pandan MP, former Economy Minister and former Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) Deputy President, lost an internal party election by a landslide, survived a no-confidence motion in his own division by eight votes, resigned from cabinet, and is openly considering contesting GE16 outside PKR entirely. In conventional political logic, this movement should be collapsing; instead, it is amplifying.

Like the great personality-derived ideologies of Latin America such as Peronism, Guevarism, Aprismo — Rafizism names an individual, carries an inherent contradiction and ultimately proves bigger than the person who inspired it. This contradiction is not a weakness, but an engine. An ideology named after someone who rejects the naming becomes portable.

It travels beyond the person, survives the person's defeats and is claimed by successors who share the values but not the biography.

This ideology is best understood as the most recent and most dynamic iteration of Malaysia's progressive multiracial tradition. It explicitly claims to carry the original spirit of Reformasi into the current political moment, much as Semangat 46 once claimed to carry the founding ideals of UMNO formed in 1946, only to find itself in contest with the very institution whose values it invoked. The parallel is instructive; the claim of authentic ideological lineage is both the source of the moral authority of Rafizism , and the source of its political tension with the establishment it inhabits.

Why do reformist movements that have achieved a semblance of power, so reliably become what they once opposed? This question has defined Malaysian politics for a generation — Malaysians living through this

cycle twice in the past 30 years. Rafizism is the name for the political force that refuses to accept it a third time.

This response argues that Rafizism is a live and contested political force with demonstrated electoral impact, a multiracial parliamentary faction and a growing following among Malay males, Gen X and millennials who represent the urban and suburban demographic that will determine Malaysia's political direction in GE16 and beyond.

Three Waves, One Refusal

Rafizism has not emerged from nowhere. It is the product of three distinct political waves, each generating real momentum and each falling short of lasting institutional change.

Reformasi (1998): The Rupture

When Anwar Ibrahim was sacked, detained, and charged in 1998, his supporters took to the streets under the banner of Reformasi. The 1999 general election delivered the consequences; UMNO lost 22 parliamentary seats, its worst result in history. For the first time, UMNO held fewer seats than the combined total of its coalition partners. Four ministers and five deputy ministers were defeated (Lin, 2002; Wikipedia, 2024).

Reformasi proved something important. Malay voters could be moved by institutional arguments, including accountability, judicial independence and rule of law, rather than purely ethnic appeals. However, Reformasi was built around one man's injustice. When circumstances changed, the movement had no durable vehicle to carry its values forward. Its personality-dependence was both its greatest strength and its most critical structural weakness.

Bersih (2007-2016): The Institutionalisation

Bersih built what Reformasi could not: a civil society infrastructure around clean elections and institutional integrity that operated independently of personalities and parties. Five major rallies between 2007 and 2016 built public consciousness that ultimately contributed to BN's historic defeat in 2018 (Khoo, 2021; Chan, 2018). As Khoo (2021) observed, Bersih lost the battle for electoral reform but won the war in GE14, only to watch the prospects for change dashed by the political realities that followed.

Bersih faced its own structural ceiling. It could mobilise and it could pressure but it could not govern or legislate. When GE14 produced a new government, the promise of institutional reform quietly dissolved into the competing pressures of coalition management. The movement had successfully shifted public consciousness without embedding its demands into durable political institutions.

The PN Conservative Wave (GE15, 2022): The Shift That Changed Everything

The 2022 general election produced PAS winning 49 parliamentary seats, the single largest haul by any party in Malaysian history. Whatever the precise demographic drivers of this result, the political consequence was unambiguous: the entire Overton window of Malaysian political discourse shifted to the right (Ostwald & Oliver, 2023).

The response of almost every major political actor, including Anwar Ibrahim and Pakatan Harapan, was accommodation. Positions on Islamic governance softened. Communal Malay signalling intensified. Progressive commitments were quietly shelved in the name of coalition stability. UMNO, the very coalition PH had spent two decades opposing, was brought into cabinet. The conservative wave did not just win seats, it won the argument about what Malaysian politics was fundamentally supposed to be about. In doing so, it left Malaysia's progressive multiracial tradition without a clear political home.

Rafizism emerges here, not from the streets and not from the opposition benches, but from inside the ruling coalition itself, as the organised refusal to follow the rightward drift. That structural position is what makes it genuinely novel.

The Six Principles of Rafizism

Rafizism is best understood as a cluster of principled commitments rather than a fully formed governing programme. Together, they constitute a coherent political position that distinguishes itself clearly from the alternatives available in Malaysian politics today.

The urban Malay electorate as the decisive ground

Rafizism identifies the urban Malay electorate, rather than the Chinese middle class or the rural

Malay heartland, as where Malaysia's democratic future will ultimately be decided. As Malaysia urbanises and educational attainment rises, a generation of Malay professionals is forming whose primary concerns are housing affordability, wage growth, career mobility and institutional fairness. These are not concerns that ethnic patronage or Islamist governance promises adequately address. Ayuh Malaysia, Rafizi's GE15 campaign vehicle, focused exclusively on these livelihood issues, a deliberate strategic choice to contest ground where evidence-based politics holds a genuine competitive advantage over identity-based appeals.

Multiracialism as governing principle

Rafizism insists on multiracialism not as ethnic arithmetic, the careful balancing of communal shares that has defined Malaysian coalition politics since independence but as the organising principle of governance itself. This is the direct inheritance of PKR's founding DNA, which Rafizism argues has been progressively abandoned as coalition pressures mount. The multiracial composition of the HIRUK-aligned faction, spanning Malay, Chinese and Indian parliamentarians acting in concert on institutional principles, is this commitment made concrete and visible.

Structural institutional reform

Rafizism demands that institutions be rebuilt to constrain bad behaviour, not merely that better individuals be placed within them. The demand for a Royal Commission of Inquiry on judicial appointments, made publicly in July 2025 by 9 sitting government backbenchers, is the clearest recent expression of this. At the press conference, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad framed the demand as a direct continuation of PKR's founding commitments, from the 1988 Salleh Abas sacking through the Reformasi era to Anwar's own trials (Malay Mail, 2025a). This logic becomes straightforward — PKR was formed because institutions failed. If PKR in government repeats those institutional failures, it has betrayed its own foundational reason for existing.

Accountability without exceptions

Rafizism applies the same accountability standard to allies and opponents alike. This is its most politically costly commitment and simultaneously its most essential one. Nine PKR MPs, sitting as government backbenchers, publicly called for an independent inquiry into their own coalition's conduct. The response, in which nineteen Johor PKR divisions called for their suspension, confirmed precisely how destabilising this principle is for coalition management and how necessary it remains for Rafizism's credibility and internal coherence (Free Malaysia Today, 2025a).

Pragmatic welfarism, not ideological socialism

Rafizism is deeply concerned with the rakyat marhaen: ordinary Malaysians struggling with wages, housing and the rising cost of living. Its policy response, however, is evidence-based and market-compatible rather than ideologically socialist. Three policies from Rafizi's tenure as Economy Minister illustrate this precisely. The Inisiatif Pendapatan Rakyat (IPR), launched in February 2023, targeted hardcore poor and B40 households through a dual-pronged approach: generating sustainable income via agricultural entrepreneurship, food business, and service operator initiatives, rather than relying on cash transfers alone (Ibrahim, 2023). The National Energy Transition Roadmap (NETR) framed green energy explicitly as a jobs and prosperity programme rather than an environmental ideology. The Progressive Wage Model, adapted from Singapore's experience, tied wage growth to skills and productivity acquisition rather than imposing blunt across-the-board wage mandates. The JS-SEZ, inaugurated in January 2025, represents the same pragmatic logic applied at the bilateral level. There is a consistent thread across all four; identify a structural lever, apply expertise and produce measurable results for people who are not already winning.

Data over sentiment

Political decisions should be grounded in evidence rather than communal instinct or political machinery. This is a substantive claim about how governance itself should operate: through evidence, transparency and measurable outcomes rather than communal patronage and institutional opacity. Where Malaysian politics has historically rewarded ethnic mobilisation and machinery, Rafizism bets on data, argumentation and the persuadability of undecided voters. The clearest institutional expression of this commitment was Invoke Malaysia, founded by Rafizi ahead of GE14, which demonstrated that progressive multiracial politics could compete

on data-driven terrain and win. The electoral proof of that proposition is examined in a later section.

HIRUK, DAMAI and the Reach of Rafizism

The internal contest for PKR's deputy presidency in May 2025 crystallised the ideological fault lines within the party in unusually explicit terms. Rafizi's campaign was branded HIRUK, an acronym for Hidupkan Idealisme Reformasi dalam Ujian Kuasa, or "Reviving the Ideals of Reformasi in the Test of Power." Nurul Izzah Anwar's campaign ran under the banner of DAMAI, Dari Akar, Membina Aspirasi Inklusif, or "From the Roots, Building Inclusive Aspirations," emphasising party unity and coalition cohesion over confrontation (Free Malaysia Today, 2025b). Nurul Izzah won decisively, securing 9,803 votes against Rafizi's 3,866 (Malay Mail, 2025b).

The result was widely interpreted as a decisive repudiation of Rafizism within PKR's delegate structure. That reading requires significant qualification. The HIRUK camp drew its support from urban liberals, progressive grassroots members and reform-minded parliamentarians whose ideological orientation does not shift with an internal party ballot. Among the prominent figures aligned with HIRUK were Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad and Akmal Nasir, both proteges whom Rafizi groomed and who have emerged as credible political figures in their own right. Nik Nazmi is widely regarded as among the best-performing ministers in the current cabinet and a principled advocate of institutional reform. Rodziah Ismail and others round out a faction whose ideological coherence runs deeper than a single internal ballot result (Wikipedia, 2025b).

The cabinet reshuffle by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in December 2025 added a further layer of complexity. Akmal Nasir was appointed Economy Minister, subsequently inheriting the very portfolio that Rafizi built and shaped. Syed Ibrahim Syed Noh, one of the 9 MPs who stood with Rafizi at the July 2025 judicial RCI press conference, was elevated to Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability. Yuneswaran, who ran on the HIRUK ticket during the PKR polls, was also brought into the ministerial fold (Harapan Daily, 2025). These appointments have been interpreted as a containment strategy, absorbing dissent by elevating its proponents into the executive. That interpretation is plausible but incomplete. A mentor's influence does not end at the cabinet door. The proteges carry the values with them.

Co-optation into the establishment does not automatically translate into ideological conversion. The HIRUK-aligned figures now serving as ministers carry their principled commitments into the cabinet itself. Their presence means that Rafizism has penetrated the executive, not just the backbench. The reach of Rafizism is therefore considerably broader than its most visible expression would suggest. On 7 July 2025, the 9 MPs who stood publicly at the judicial RCI press conference were Rafizi Ramli (Pandan), Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad (Setiawangsa), Wong Chen (Subang), Rodziah Ismail (Ampang), Zahir Hassan (Wangsa Maju), Muhammad Bakhtiar Wan Chik (Balik Pulau), Syed Ibrahim Syed Noh (Ledang), S. Kesavan (Sungai Siput), and Onn Abu Bakar (Batu Pahat) (Focus Malaysia, 2025). Beyond the 9, DAP and Amanah figures outside cabinet have expressed sympathy without publicly breaking ranks, suggesting that the latent coalition is considerably larger than its most visible membership.

The Electoral Proof, the Digital Constituency and What Comes Next

The significance of Rafizism rests not only on ideological coherence but on demonstrated electoral capacity, a dynamic public following and a political trajectory that is still actively unfolding. Invoke Malaysia, the data analytics organisation Rafizi founded ahead of GE14, applied logistic regression across a cumulative sample of over 200,000 respondents to identify persuadable fence-sitters in marginal constituencies rather than simply mobilising the already-converted. As of January 2017, more than a year before polling day, Invoke was the only organisation consistently predicting a PH victory. Every established polling firm and international analytical institution expected BN to retain power. Invoke was correct (Malay Mail, 2018). Beyond the accuracy of its prediction, Invoke introduced a methodological shift: progressive multiracial politics could compete on data-driven terrain rather than relying purely on machinery and communal mobilisation.

In GE15, Rafizi won Pandan with a majority of 48,296 votes, one of the largest individual

majorities in that election, in a three-cornered contest conducted in the same political environment where PAS swept the Malay heartlands (The Star, 2022). Pandan is a mixed urban constituency with a substantial Malay voter base. Winning it by that margin demonstrates that Rafizism's specific political positioning, progressive, issue-based and institutionally focused, can reach urban Malay voters that conventional multiracial coalitions consistently fail to convert. The Pandan result constitutes the empirical foundation of Rafizism's central strategic claim about the urban Malay electorate.

Beyond the ballot box, Rafizism has demonstrated a distinctive capacity to build and sustain public engagement through direct communication. While still minister, Rafizi launched Yang Bakar Menteri, a podcast explicitly framed around evidence-based economic commentary. After resigning from cabinet following his loss of the PKR deputy presidency, he relaunched it under the name Yang Berhenti Menteri, a deliberate play on the same YBM acronym, signalling continuity of purpose rather than retreat (Malay Mail, 2025c). The podcast has outperformed Keluar Sekejap, itself considered one of Malaysia's most popular political podcasts, and has attracted a strong following among Malay males, Gen X and millennials. The parallel with Keluar Sekejap is not incidental: that podcast was born from Khairy Jamaluddin's expulsion from UMNO in 2023, and made KJ more influential outside UMNO than he had been within it (Wikipedia, 2025c). KJ's political exile produced one of Malaysia's most consequential media platforms. Rafizi's departure from the executive appears to be producing the same dynamic.

The timing adds another layer of significance. KJ rejoined UMNO unconditionally in April 2026, returning to the party structure as Rafizi's own announcement of his political direction approaches (Scoop, 2026). Rafizi has confirmed he will reveal his political direction in June 2026, marking one year since his resignation from cabinet. He has ruled out joining a conventional third force and has been deliberately ambiguous about whether his vehicle will take the form of a formal party, a political collective or a coordinated independent candidacy (Free Malaysia Today, 2026; Focus Malaysia, 2026). What is unambiguous is the framing — him stating publicly that he joined PKR because of its progressive, multicultural and professional ideals, and that those ideals have faded since the party rose to power (The Rakyat Post, 2026).

Rafizism in ASEAN, and the Trumpism Parallel

Rafizism is not a uniquely Malaysian phenomenon. Across Southeast Asia, a consistent structural pattern has emerged: technocratic, accountability-based political movements arise in the space created when reformist governments accommodate the systems they promised to change, producing what might be called the second disillusionment, not with authoritarianism but with the reformists themselves.

The closest regional parallel is Thailand. Move Forward Party, dissolved by the Constitutional Court in August 2024 for demanding constitutional reform, shared several defining characteristics with Rafizism: evidence-based and non-identitarian in its political positioning, consistently stronger among urban young voters than its formal electoral results reflected, and ultimately suppressed by institutional mechanisms rather than defeated at the ballot box (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Its successor, the People's Party, continues to operate under the same constraints. What the Thai case demonstrates is that the constituency for this kind of politics, educated, urban, institutionally reform-minded, is real and durable even when the formal political vehicle is repeatedly destroyed. The demand does not disappear when the party does. It reorganises, rebrands and returns. That is precisely the trajectory Rafizism is on, with the significant difference that Malaysia's institutional constraints, while real, have not yet reached the threshold of judicial dissolution.

The Singapore case carries a paradox that speaks directly to Rafizism's internal contradiction. Pritam Singh built the Workers' Party into Singapore's most credible opposition force through deliberate institutional restraint: evidence-based parliamentary debate, team-over-personality branding and a consistent refusal to position himself as a charismatic saviour figure. The counterintuitive result was that he became the most popular opposition

politician in Singapore's modern history precisely because he did not seek to be. When convicted and stripped of his official leader of opposition title, the WP declined to nominate a replacement, asserting the collective institutional identity of the party over the individual. This is anti-hero-worship deployed as the most effective form of political heroism and Rafizism carries the same productive paradox.

The most provocative comparative lens, and admittedly the most contested, is Trumpism. The ideological content of the two movements is diametrically opposed and the comparison must be made with that caveat stated clearly. Where Trumpism is nativist and anti-institutional, Rafizism is multiracial and institutionally reformist. The parallel lies not in ideology but in political mechanics and durability.

Donald Trump was widely written off after his 2020 electoral defeat and the January 2021 Capitol events. He returned to win the 2024 presidential election decisively. More significantly, even after Trump's eventual departure from the political stage, the Republican Party and American political culture will continue to bear the imprint of Trumpism: the grievances mobilised, the institutional norms it challenged and the voter coalition assembled that will not simply dissolve. The -ism outlasts the individual because the conditions that produced it have not been resolved.

The same structural logic applies to Rafizism though the political context is entirely different. The conditions that produced it, the accommodation of reformist parties, the rightward shift of the Overton window, the erosion of Reformasi's founding values within PKR itself, have not been resolved. They have, if anything, deepened. Whether Rafizi wins his Pandan seat in GE16, whether his June 2026 announcement produces a formal party or a looser political collective, whether the HIRUK camp consolidates or fragments, the set of demands Rafizism represents will continue to find expression in Malaysian politics.

The grievance is structural. With the constituency growing, the movement has already demonstrated, twice, that it can move electoral outcomes. To write it off at the moment of its apparent institutional weakness would be to repeat the analytical error made about Trumpism in 2020 and about Reformasi itself in the years between 1999 and 2018.

The Second Disillusionment and What Comes After

Southeast Asia's democratic story has been told as a contest between authoritarianism and liberal reform. That framing obscures what is actually happening in the current period; a cycle in which reformist movements achieve power, accommodate incumbent systems, and generate the political energy for the next wave of reform demands. Rafizism is Malaysia's current expression of that cycle and it carries a quality that distinguishes it from its predecessors.

Reformasi was born from personal injustice, which was done to one man. Bersih was born from institutional failure, what the electoral system was doing to everyone. Rafizism is born from the betrayal of a promise made by people who knew better. That is a different and, arguably, deeper source of political fuel because it cannot be resolved by the release of a single individual or the passage of a single piece of electoral legislation. It requires a sustained reckoning with whether Malaysia's reformist tradition means what it says.

The question for Malaysia and for ASEAN is not whether Rafizi wins the next election. It is whether the political tradition he represents can build sufficient institutional depth, methodological credibility and ideological clarity to reshape what Malaysian politics considers possible. The evidence from GE14, GE15, the Pandan result, the reach of HIRUK-aligned figures across the cabinet, the growing audience of Yang Berhenti Menteri and the approaching June 2026 announcement suggests that the movement is not winding down. It is reorganising.

Progressive multiracial politics in Malaysia has never lacked a constituency, it lacked a durable vehicle. Rafizism, for all its contradictions, may be the most serious attempt yet to build one that outlasts its origins. In a region where the conservative tide is rising and where reformist movements have repeatedly failed the test of power, that attempt matters well beyond Malaysia's borders.

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