



Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim addresses staff at the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya, November 29, 2022. (Photo: Anwar Ibrahim / Facebook)

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# Anwar's Uneasy Truce with Malaysia's Powerful Civil Service

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**Anwar Ibrahim's relationship with Malaysia's powerful civil service is key to his government's success and survival. He faces serious challenges in maintaining a positive relationship, but developments since 2018 help his chances.**

Anwar Ibrahim faces no shortage of challenges as Malaysia's tenth prime minister. His government's high stakes relationship with the country's vast and powerful civil service is among them. The experiences of the 2018-2020 Pakatan Harapan (PH) government demonstrate why: pockets of the civil service, uncomfortable with PH's perceived progressive leanings and unaccustomed to taking orders from a non-UMNO government, were unresponsive to ministerial orders or outright obstructionist. That impeded PH's ability to deliver on its agenda and eventually compounded the political crisis that led to its collapse.

Anwar clearly understands the importance of securing the civil service's cooperation, [noting](#) that "there is no way I can succeed if the backbone of the civil service is not with me." That conciliatory message, delivered with Anwar's characteristic charm, may help his relationship with the [1.6 million](#)-strong institution that has played a central role in driving Malaysia's socioeconomic development. More importantly, there are several broader differences between 2018 and 2023 that give him a fighting chance.

First, Anwar has led the fourth new government since the defeat of UMNO's Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in 2018. With each transition, the upper echelons of the civil service have become more accustomed to taking orders from new ministers. This is an important evolution for an institution that previously knew only UMNO governments for over six decades. During that period, ministerial transitions were often carefully coordinated and involved figures already familiar to the civil service.

Second, the political instability of the past five years has weakened the linkage between UMNO and the civil service. During UMNO's long rule, the line between party and state frequently became blurred, resulting in pockets of the civil service acting as extensions of the party. Election results from the Putrajaya constituency, which is made up predominantly of civil servants and their families, are instructive. UMNO comfortably won above two-thirds of the vote in the 2004, 2008, and 2013 general elections. Its support slipped to 49 per cent in the 2018 general election as a three-cornered fight divided votes, but UMNO still won the seat by a safe margin. In 2022, following several years of political instability, UMNO took only 37 per cent of the vote, losing to a Perikatan Nasional (PN) candidate. The loyalty of the civil service, this suggests, has become more fluid and divided.

Third, the inclusion of UMNO and the East Malaysian coalitions Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) in Anwar's unity government helps to counter the perception that it is "liberal" or otherwise hostile to Bumiputera interests. The unity government's greater number of Bumiputera MPs and parties relative to its PH predecessor is important here. Equally so, however, is the fact that all symbolically meaningful positions are now helmed by Bumiputera, unlike in 2018 when Lim Guan Eng (as Finance Minister) and Tommy Thomas (as Attorney General) became focal points for attacks against PH.

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Anwar realises the danger of being perceived as anti-Bumiputera. After all, the civil service grew increasingly Malay-Muslim in [composition and character](#) over the decades of UMNO's rule and continues to see itself as a vehicle for the empowerment of the country's indigenous people. Thus, the closely-related final point: Anwar and his cabinet appear to have learned lessons from the previous PH government, and have taken a more cautious approach in engaging the civil service in both tone and substance. This is reflected in the emphasis on stability and continuity, as well as the general avoidance of confrontation on anything reform related.

One hundred days into the new government's tenure, Anwar and his cabinet have established a reasonably constructive relationship with key parts of the civil service. But there is no assurance that this will continue beyond the honeymoon period. Two challenges stand out. Anwar's reformist past creates expectations that he will act on calls to [modernise the civil service](#), without which Malaysia's transition to a high-income economy will be difficult. Those expectations are in tension with his current cautious approach. Perhaps the unity government's political position is too precarious to take on civil service reform at this point. But if so, Anwar will need to justify that to expectant supporters within his government, the private sector, and the broader public to keep the tension in check.

Equally challenging is the [onslaught](#) of racially and religiously charged attacks from the PN opposition. It is not just the Malay electorate and wavering MPs that PN is seeking to win over — the civil service, which already demonstrated its openness to PN in GE15, is a prime target as well. PN has no shortage of potential leverage points to take advantage of. Last month, for example, the [Democratic Action Party's P. Ramasamy](#) sparked controversy when he remarked that the civil service was dominated by Malays. The civil service has also made [demands](#) for wage increases that could grow contentious if unmet.

If PN's agitation finds widespread traction within the civil service's ranks, the hitherto constructive relationship with Anwar's government could quickly erode. In short, the obstructionism that PH encountered between 2018-2020 is by no means inevitable, but it will take ample political skill from Anwar's government to keep both the civil service and PH's reform-oriented supporters on its side.

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