

Malaysia: change at last

by GWYNNE DYER

If Anwar Ibrahim had become prime minister of Malaysia in the late 1990s, when he was in his early 50s, instead of being jailed on trumped-up sodomy and corruption charges, Malaysia might now be a very different place. He's finally getting his chance ? he was sworn in on Friday ? but now he's 75. Is it too late for the kind of Malaysia he promised?

From the start Anwar promised to fight corruption and ?rid this country of racism and religious bigotry.? Corruption is certainly rampant ? former prime minister Najib Razak was jailed early this year for looting billions of dollars from government funds ? but what really distinguishes Anwar Ibrahim is his stand against ethnic and religious favouritism.

Malaysia is a complicated country. It was one of the Asian 'Tigers', and it has a much higher per capita GDP (\$12,900 per annum) than any other big country in South or South-East Asia. But one particular ethnic and religious group is quite poor: the Malays, the overwhelming majority of whom are Muslims.

This may seem counter-intuitive, because the great majority of the country's powerful politicians have always been Malays, as are quite a lot of the richest people. (In fact, they are often the same people.) These discrepancies are mostly due to British imperial history.

When Britain first gained control of Malaya two centuries ago, almost everybody living there was Malay, but most of them were peasant farmers. London therefore encouraged immigration from the Indian subcontinent, and later from China as well, to provide labour for the tin mines, rubber plantations and other rich resources of the peninsula.

At independence in 1957, therefore, the new country was almost exactly half non-Malay. This was understandably seen as a catastrophe by the Malays.

The Malays managed to improve that ratio by expelling overwhelmingly Chinese Singapore from the new country and by declaring the indigenous peoples of North Borneo to be honorary Malays. This created a two-thirds majority of 'bumiputras' (Malay or Malay-adjacent 'sons of the soil') in the new and quite unstable country called 'Malaysia'.

A kind of stability arrived after the '13 May Incident' of 1969, when Malays massacred at least 200 Chinese and other non-Malay people in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Thereafter 'bumiputras' were granted a de facto monopoly of political power, while Chinese citizens (25% of the population) and Indian Malaysians (7%) were left free to make money.

There was also a commitment to raise the standing of the mostly rural and impoverished bumiputras, but this was to be done by increasing the collective Malay share of the national GDP, not by raising the income and status of the broad majority of individual Malays.

Ethnic Malays got some real advantages, like priority in university entrance and access to government jobs (which created resentment among non-Malays).

Other Malays got very rich by serving as bumiputra 'partners' or figureheads in non-Malay businesses (which met the 'collective Malay share of GDP' requirement). But most Malays stayed poor.

This has been the system in Malaysia for more than fifty years now ? and Anwar Ibrahim has struggled to change it all his life. He is Malay and Muslim himself, but he can see that it does not serve the interests of ordinary Malays ? nor of ordinary Chinese or Indian Malaysians either. It just protects the interests of the already rich of all ethnicities.

So Anwar has always had support from Malaysians of all ethnic and religious groups who are left behind by this system.

He is a genuine threat, which is why he came close to power three times in the past, and was thrice jailed on the same false charges. He has spent ten of the past 25 years in prison.

Now he is prime minister, because the system is breaking down. The poor majority of Muslim Malays, left in poverty by their own community leaders, have turned in large numbers to a radical Islamic fundamentalist party that demands the imposition of Shariah law.

That would destroy a country where more than 30 percent of the people are not Muslims, so voters of every community who want to change the system but not destroy the country have given Anwar Ibrahim his chance at last. His Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) party got more seats than any other in last week's election.

He still has to win the support of some other parties to form a majority government, but he seems to have the numbers. He has already promised to raise the economic status of the impoverished Malay-Muslim majority, while breaking the corrupt political system that keeps them as a compliant and underprivileged vote bank.

His slogan is still 'reform', not 'revolution', and he will certainly try hard. The question is whether he comes to power too old and too late.