

Anwar Ibrahim as Malaysia's Reformist Leader: Reshaping Political Leadership and Nationhood in Post-Reformasi Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Anwar Ibrahim's ascent to the Malaysian premiership on 24 November 2022 marked the culmination of a prolonged journey that significantly reshaped the nation's political landscape. This article critically examines Anwar Ibrahim's role as a reformist leader by exploring how his reform agendas have contributed to redefining Malaysia's national identity within frameworks of plurality and universality. Drawing from Anwar's prominent literary works, such as "The Asian Renaissance," "Letters from Prison," and the foundational "1998 Permatang Pauh Declaration," the study utilises textual analysis to elucidate the transformative impact of his political philosophy. Specifically, the paper evaluates the articulation and implementation of seven core reformist agendas: the enhancement of human dignity, the pursuit of justice across all societal strata, popular sovereignty as the fundamental source of political authority, equitable economic distribution, the eradication of corruption and abuse of power, the reinforcement of dynamic cultural identities, and the establishment of a civilised nation. By contextualising Anwar's ideological inspirations, notably from figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Jose Rizal, this study underscores the intersection of moral integrity, democratic ideals, and pragmatic governance that characterises his leadership. Ultimately, the analysis presented provides a nuanced understanding of how Anwar Ibrahim's leadership trajectory embodies the aspirations for a just, accountable, and inclusive Malaysia, thus contributing to broader scholarly discourses on political reform and nationhood in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Anwar Ibrahim; Reformasi Movement; Political Leadership; Nation-building; Economic Justice; Cultural Identity

INTRODUCTION

Anwar Ibrahim's ascent to Malaysia's highest political office on 24 November 2022 marks a significant turning point in the nation's contemporary political history. His journey is emblematic of a protracted and challenging quest for political reform and societal transformation that began dramatically with his controversial dismissal as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance in September 1998. This event triggered Malaysia's Reformasi movement, a broad-based civil mobilisation inspired by parallel democratic awakenings across Southeast Asia, notably in Indonesia (Funston, 2000; Lim, 2023). Anwar's principled defiance against systemic corruption, autocratic governance, and entrenched socio-economic inequalities has significantly influenced Malaysia's political dynamics and societal aspirations for over two decades.

As a figure widely perceived as the "Father of the Malaysian Reformation," Anwar Ibrahim has articulated a robust reform agenda through seminal declarations and writings, notably the Permatang Pauh Declaration of 1998. These manifestos outline his vision for Malaysia centred around human dignity (*karamah insaniyah*), justice for all societal strata, democratic popular sovereignty, equitable economic practices, elimination of corruption, reinforcement of multicultural identities, and the creation of a civilised and accountable nation (Siddiq, 2018). His intellectual and political philosophies resonate profoundly with prominent reformist thinkers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Jose Rizal, reflecting his aspiration to harmonise universal values of morality, democratic accountability, and pragmatic governance within Malaysia's unique pluralistic context.

Despite enduring politically motivated imprisonments and continuous character assaults, Anwar's reformist resolve remained unyielding, significantly reshaping Malaysia's political culture and civil society landscape (Boo Teik, 2003; Weiss, 2004). His relentless advocacy for democratic freedoms and transparent governance attracted widespread domestic and international support, catalysing a vibrant and enduring civic activism represented by movements such as GERAK, ADIL, and BERSIH. These collective actions have critically expanded Malaysia's public sphere, fundamentally challenging longstanding political orthodoxies and fostering a resilient culture of accountability and public participation.

While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the events of Reformasi and Anwar Ibrahim's political trajectory, there remains a discernible gap in examining how his articulated reform agendas—rooted in both Islamic and universal moral-philosophical traditions—have shaped institutional governance and national identity in post-Reformasi Malaysia. Existing studies have largely focused on electoral politics, opposition coalitions, or state responses to dissent, yet few offer a detailed analysis of Anwar's reformist leadership as a coherent ideological project that continues to influence Malaysia's nation-building trajectory (Zulfiani, 2019; Kurlantzick, 2024).

To address this gap, this study is guided by three core research questions:

1. How has Anwar Ibrahim's political philosophy, as articulated in his foundational texts, contributed to reshaping Malaysia's post-Reformasi governance discourse?
2. In what ways do Anwar's reform agendas redefine conceptions of political leadership, democratic participation, and national identity?
3. What theoretical and policy implications arise from Anwar Ibrahim's vision for ethical governance and pluralistic nationhood?

This article examines Anwar Ibrahim's transformative impact as Malaysia's premier reformist leader by systematically analysing the implementation of his reformist agendas. Employing a comprehensive textual analysis of Anwar's foundational literary works—including "The Asian Renaissance", "Letters from Prison", and his declarations—it assesses how his political ideology has substantively reshaped national discourses and practices around governance, economic equity, and cultural inclusivity. In doing so, the analysis situates Anwar Ibrahim's leadership within broader academic discourses concerning political reform, national identity, and democratic governance in Southeast Asia.

This study contributes theoretically by advancing an integrative framework that intersects Islamic political ethics, democratic theory, and Southeast Asian governance models. It further offers policy insights into how values-based leadership can foster inclusive nation-building in plural societies. Ultimately, this study contributes significantly to scholarly understandings of how reform-oriented political leadership can redefine nationhood, governance, and societal norms in transitional democratic contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach, primarily employing textual analysis to critically investigate Anwar Ibrahim's reformist leadership and its transformative impact on Malaysia's political and societal landscape in the post-Reformasi period. Textual analysis is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for an in-depth, systematic exploration of written materials, enabling a nuanced understanding of underlying themes, ideological structures, and discursive patterns (Tait & Schriener, 2021; Tischer et al., 2000).

The core materials subjected to this analytical framework include Anwar Ibrahim's seminal literary and political texts, notably "The Asian Renaissance," "Letters from Prison," and the pivotal "1998 Permatang Pau Declaration." These documents are significant in that they encapsulate Anwar Ibrahim's articulated political philosophy, values, and reformist ideals, thereby offering essential insights into his leadership trajectory. Each text was selected based on its profound historical and ideological relevance, enabling a comprehensive appraisal of Anwar Ibrahim's intellectual contributions and practical political visions.

To ensure analytical rigour and methodological clarity, the textual analysis was conducted through three iterative phases. Initially, an extensive literature review was carried out, encompassing diverse scholarly publications, including academic journal articles, authoritative texts, and significant historical accounts relevant to Anwar Ibrahim's political activities and Malaysia's Reformasi movement. The objective of this literature review was twofold: firstly, to establish a robust theoretical framework contextualising the Reformasi era, and secondly, to critically assess previous scholarly interpretations of Anwar Ibrahim's political strategies and reformist aspirations.

Subsequently, the study engaged in a close reading of primary textual sources, systematically identifying and extracting key thematic elements reflective of Anwar Ibrahim's seven core reform agendas. This thematic extraction facilitated a structured analysis, focusing on core dimensions such as the enhancement of human dignity (*karamah insaniyah*), universal justice, popular sovereignty, economic justice, anti-corruption measures, cultural identity reinforcement, and nation-building ideals (Siddiq, 2018). Each theme was methodically explored, employing an interpretative analytical lens to assess both explicit and implicit ideological assertions embedded within the texts.

In the final analytical phase, these identified themes were contextualised within Malaysia's socio-political evolution post-Reformasi, critically linking Anwar Ibrahim's theoretical assertions with practical political outcomes and transformations. This step involved a comprehensive cross-referencing with relevant secondary literature to substantiate findings and enhance interpretative depth. Additionally, critical insights from comparative political frameworks, particularly regional examples from Southeast Asia, were integrated to position Anwar Ibrahim's reformist strategies within broader regional and global discourses of democratic transition and governance.

By adhering rigorously to this methodological approach, the study achieves a comprehensive, robust, and academically rigorous examination of Anwar Ibrahim's role as a reformist leader, providing nuanced insights into how his political philosophy has tangibly reshaped political leadership and national identity discourses in contemporary Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of the Reformasi movement in Malaysia, triggered by the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, marked a pivotal turning point in the country's political landscape. Scholars widely acknowledge this period as one of intense political awakening, underscored by public demands for democracy, justice, transparency, and the eradication of deeply entrenched corruption and cronyism (Funston, 2000; Lim, 2023). The dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister in September 1998, based on allegations widely perceived as politically motivated, ignited widespread civic mobilisation, redefining political activism in Malaysia (Herdi et al., 2019). This upheaval paralleled similar movements across Southeast Asia, particularly the fall of President Soeharto in Indonesia, further amplifying calls for reform within Malaysia (Lim, 2023).

Anwar Ibrahim swiftly emerged as the symbolic figurehead of this democratic resistance, widely seen as embodying the aspirations of a generation clamouring for systemic change (Kwang Yang, 2020). His proactive response to his dismissal, characterised by strategic mass mobilisation, public demonstrations, and intellectual discourses, significantly transformed Malaysia's political culture. Khoo Boo Teik (2003) identifies Anwar's influential role in mobilising mass support, which culminated in notable protests such as the Kuala Lumpur demonstration on 20 September 1998. Such events significantly widened Malaysia's public sphere, challenging the state's longstanding suppression of political dissent (Boo Teik, 2003; Lee, 2014).

Central to Anwar's ideological framework is the seminal "Permatang Pauh Declaration," delivered shortly after his dismissal, which outlines his vision for comprehensive reform aimed at combating systemic corruption, promoting civil liberties, and advocating for social justice (Weiss, 2004). Anwar's ideas resonate deeply with global and regional intellectual traditions, drawing from influential reformists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Jose Rizal, who emphasise moral integrity and universal justice (Siddiq, 2018). Weiss (2004) argues that Anwar's approach fundamentally sought to reshape political attitudes and governance practices, advocating a departure from communal politics towards greater inclusivity, democratic accountability, and

meaningful public participation.

Anwar's leadership style and reformist ideals significantly impacted Malaysia's socio-political discourse, placing substantial emphasis on elevating human dignity (*karamah insaniyah*) as the cornerstone of nation-building efforts (Siddiq, 2018). This concept, deeply rooted in Islamic principles and universal humanitarian ideals, underscores respect, compassion, and justice as indispensable elements of societal cohesion (Nik Abdul Aziz, 2017; Ahmad Fauzi, 2018). The broad application of justice advocated by Anwar traverses social, economic, and political realms, echoing Al-Farabi's classical notion that justice is foundational to maintaining social harmony and political stability (Majid, 1994).

Moreover, Anwar Ibrahim persistently advocates for economic justice, underscoring the urgency of equitable economic distribution as essential to Malaysia's socio-economic stability and growth (Allers, 2013). His longstanding engagement in addressing rural poverty and economic disparities, exemplified by his activism since the Baling protests of 1974, highlights a consistent commitment to socio-economic equity (Ahmad Baha, 2009). His vision calls for a humanistic economic approach to counteract the negative impacts of unchecked capitalism, emphasising sustainable development and fairness (Ihwan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, combating corruption and abuse of power among political elites forms another critical pillar of Anwar's reformist ideology. His unwavering stance against corruption aligns with broader scholarly critiques of corruption as an endemic and destructive force undermining governance, economic development, and public trust (Maszlee, 2019; Muhammad Hatta, 2019). Anwar's reformist agenda has consistently advocated for significant legislative and institutional reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and governmental accountability (Elias, 2008).

Recognising Malaysia's cultural diversity, Anwar's approach advocates for the reinforcement of dynamic cultural identities that promote understanding, tolerance, and respect across ethnic and religious boundaries (Bakir & Cucu, 2020). His perspective aligns with Quranic injunctions on mutual understanding and cultural interaction, positioning cultural identity as a dynamic and adaptable component within a pluralistic nation-state framework (Baderin, 2003).

Finally, Anwar's broader agenda for national transformation culminates in his vision of building a civilised and humane nation. His concept of a civilised nation underscores orderly governance, social empathy, and a commitment to universal justice and peace (Muhammad Junaidi, 2016). This vision resonates with classical Islamic and contemporary sociological understandings of civilisation as orderly and compassionate governance (Mahathir, 2011).

Collectively, the scholarly literature underscores Anwar Ibrahim's comprehensive reformist approach, characterised by moral integrity, inclusive governance, and socio-economic equity. His transformative leadership has significantly reshaped Malaysian political discourse, embedding democratic ideals, transparency, and social justice as fundamental components of national identity and governance practices post-Reformasi.

FINDINGS

Anwar Ibrahim's reformist leadership manifests as a steadfast commitment to advancing fundamental ideals of freedom, justice, and ethical governance. Through critical junctures in Malaysia's recent political history, his leadership has consistently underscored an unwavering resolve to challenge oppressive governance structures and entrenched corruption. This commitment is anchored in clear ideological convictions, reflecting Anwar's uncompromising stance on democratic integrity and social equity (Elias, 2008).

The findings outlined in this section are systematically derived from a textual analysis of Anwar Ibrahim's seminal writings and public discourses, notably "The Asian Renaissance," "Letters from Prison," and the pivotal "Permatang Pauh Declaration" of 1998. These documents provide critical insights into Anwar's intellectual and political philosophy, explicitly delineating his seven core reform agendas. These agendas include the elevation of human dignity (*karamah insaniyah*), comprehensive justice, the sovereignty of popular

authority, economic fairness, eradication of corruption, enhancement of dynamic cultural identities, and the establishment of a civilised and accountable nation (Siddiq, 2018).

Throughout his multifaceted political career, spanning his student activism days to his contemporary role as Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim has consistently articulated and adhered to these foundational principles. Each phase—whether through his leadership in influential Islamic youth movements or as a pivotal figure within opposition politics—reveals a coherent and sustained advocacy for reform grounded in moral and ethical frameworks. Notably, these principles have endured despite Anwar facing severe political persecutions and systemic challenges, affirming his resolve to uphold moral integrity and democratic governance (Sheikh Omar, 2020).

This findings section explores how Anwar's ideological convictions have translated into tangible socio-political transformations within Malaysia. It particularly highlights how his seven reform agendas have been articulated and actualised through policies and civic actions, critically reshaping political leadership paradigms and national identity. In doing so, the analysis underscores Anwar Ibrahim's contributions to broader scholarly discourses on political leadership, reformist governance, and nation-building in the complex socio-political landscape of Southeast Asia.

Seven Reform Agenda Which Was Aspired By Anwar Ibrahim

Struggle for the elevation of human dignity (*karamah insaniyah*)

The core principle underpinning Anwar Ibrahim's comprehensive reform agenda is the elevation of human dignity, encapsulated in the concept of *karamah insaniyah*. This principle constitutes the moral and philosophical bedrock upon which his broader political vision and transformative policies are constructed (Siddiq, 2018). Deriving from Quranic teachings, particularly *Surah Al-Isra* verse 70, and the ethical foundations articulated in Prophet Muhammad's farewell sermon (Zulkifli, 2017), *Karamah insaniyah* extends beyond mere respect for individual autonomy; it embraces a holistic framework aimed at the ethical, spiritual, and socio-political upliftment of human beings.

Anwar's commitment to human dignity is closely intertwined with the classical Islamic philosophy and contemporary humanitarian ideals, as exemplified in his literary works, notably "The Asian Renaissance" and "Letters from Prison." This synthesis positions dignity not merely as a passive right but an active, dynamic force driving societal transformation and national rejuvenation (Nik Abdul Aziz, 2017; Ahmad Fauzi, 2018). The concept promotes inclusivity, asserting the imperative to recognise and protect the intrinsic worth of all individuals regardless of ethnic, religious, or socio-economic differences. This universalistic dimension echoes the foundational Islamic tenet of mercy to humanity—"Rahmatan lil-'Alamin"—reinforcing the universal scope of dignity in shaping a compassionate and cohesive society.

In the Malaysian context, Anwar advocates for elevating human dignity by endorsing harmonious coexistence and equitable societal relationships between diverse ethnic and religious communities (M. Kamal, 2021). His vision particularly emphasises principles such as mutual respect, compassion, and acceptance of multicultural and multi-religious diversity, essential in Malaysia's pluralistic social fabric. Such an approach actively counters divisive politics, providing a robust ideological alternative to ethnocentric or exclusivist narratives, thereby reshaping national identity towards more inclusive paradigms.

Furthermore, Anwar envisages human dignity as a catalyst for democratic governance, transparency, and accountability. This involves empowering citizens through democratic participation, enabling individuals to realise their fullest potential within a framework of justice and equity (Zakiyuddin, 2015). His reformist leadership consistently promotes civic education, critical public discourse, and active civil society engagement, thus enhancing societal resilience against authoritarian excesses and corruption.

Significantly, Anwar's formulation of *karamah insaniyah* integrates economic justice as a foundational aspect of human dignity. His longstanding commitment to socio-economic reforms addresses systemic inequities, advocating equitable economic distribution, sustainable development, and protection of vulnerable societal

sectors against capitalist exploitation (Allers, 2013; Ihwan et al., 2019). Economic dignity, in Anwar's philosophy, is thus integral to comprehensive national development, enabling broader societal stability and shared prosperity.

The practical implementation of Anwar's human dignity-centred approach has notably involved rigorous anti-corruption initiatives aimed at reinforcing ethical governance and safeguarding public trust. By institutionalising transparency and integrity in public administration, Anwar seeks to cultivate a governance environment conducive to societal advancement and individual empowerment (Elias, 2008; Maszlee, 2019).

In conclusion, Anwar Ibrahim's unwavering commitment to the elevation of human dignity is fundamental to his vision for reshaping political leadership and nationhood in post-Reformasi Malaysia. Through this profound commitment, he articulates a transformative socio-political agenda, aspiring towards a Malaysia characterised by ethical governance, inclusive multicultural coexistence, economic equity, and democratic accountability. His ideological legacy significantly contributes to contemporary discourses on political reform and national identity formation, positioning *karamah insaniyah* as pivotal to Malaysia's progressive trajectory.

Fighting for justice for all

Central to Anwar Ibrahim's political ethos is an unwavering commitment to justice, a principle extensively reflected in his public discourse, policies, and writings. Rooted in Islamic jurisprudential and ethical foundations, Anwar's conception of justice transcends mere legality, embedding itself deeply within the socio-economic, political, and cultural fabric of Malaysian society (Siddiq, 2018). His advocacy is guided by an inclusive notion of justice as delineated in the Quran, particularly highlighted in *Surah Al-Hadid* (25), which mandates equitable treatment across societal divisions without discrimination.

Anwar's expansive interpretation of justice aligns closely with Islamic scholarly thought, as exemplified by Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah's comprehensive discussions in "*Usul al-fiqh*" (Anwar, 1997). This tradition underscores the imperative of equity across judicial processes, societal interactions, and inter-communal relations, thus promoting an inclusive, holistic societal equilibrium. Correspondingly, Al-Farabi's philosophical assertion that justice constitutes the bedrock of political stability and societal cohesion further informs Anwar's leadership philosophy (Majid, 1994).

In practical terms, Anwar Ibrahim's pursuit of justice explicitly rejects narrow ethno-nationalist or chauvinist agendas that have historically undermined Malaysian pluralism (Shaharuddin, 2017). Instead, his political praxis embraces and operationalises the principles of equity and fairness as universal imperatives, inclusive of ethnic, religious, and socio-economic diversity. His consistent stance against discriminatory practices serves as a corrective mechanism within Malaysia's complex multi-ethnic landscape, countering exclusionary politics by advocating policies that reflect universal moral and ethical standards.

Furthermore, Anwar's commitment to justice manifests in his tireless activism against corruption and abuses of power. Recognising these as severe impediments to social justice, he has consistently emphasised transparent governance and accountability mechanisms, vital for safeguarding the rights and dignity of all citizens (Maszlee, 2019; Muhammad Hatta, 2019). His proactive measures, such as revisions to the Anti-Corruption Act to ensure accountability even after public officials leave office (Elias, 2008), illustrate a practical implementation of his justice-centred reform agenda.

Economically, Anwar has persistently championed a distributive form of justice that prioritises inclusive economic growth and equitable wealth distribution. His historical advocacy, notably dating back to the Baling protests of 1974, demonstrates a long-standing commitment to addressing systemic economic inequalities (Ahmad Baha, 2009; Allers, 2013). By foregrounding principles such as public interest (*maslahah*) and accountability (*hisbah*), Anwar's economic justice framework seeks to mitigate the oppressive effects of unbridled capitalism, thus ensuring balanced socio-economic development (Ihwan et al., 2019).

Anwar Ibrahim's justice agenda also significantly incorporates cultural and inter-religious dimensions, advocating mutual understanding and respect among Malaysia's diverse populations. In this light, justice

operates as a unifying, reconciliatory principle essential for societal harmony, countering divisive ideologies with a commitment to inclusivity and intercultural solidarity (Bakir & Cucu, 2020).

Thus, Anwar Ibrahim's comprehensive justice agenda embodies a transformative vision for Malaysia, grounded in ethical governance, inclusive economic policies, and socio-cultural equity. By consistently advocating these justice-based reforms, Anwar seeks to reshape Malaysia's political landscape, nurturing a national identity premised on universal fairness, dignity, and inclusive prosperity, ultimately redefining the essence of political leadership and nationhood in the post-Reformasi era.

The sovereignty of the people's power as the source of power

Central to Anwar Ibrahim's reformist vision is the concept of popular sovereignty—"al-sha'b masdar al-Sultah"—asserting that political legitimacy and authority originate inherently from the collective will of the citizenry (Siddiq, 2018). Grounded in democratic principles, this approach elevates the populace as the definitive source of governmental power, placing accountability, transparency, and responsive governance at its core. This principle aligns closely with broader democratic aspirations articulated in Anwar's foundational texts, notably "The Asian Renaissance" and the "Permatang Pauh Declaration," which underscore citizen empowerment as crucial for the nation's political evolution.

Drawing inspiration from influential Southeast Asian intellectual traditions, Anwar references Buya Syafii Maarif's articulation of popular sovereignty as fundamental to a vibrant and sustainable democracy, emphasising robust civic engagement as vital in nurturing democratic health (Iqbal, 2019). Maarif's advocacy underscores democracy as an ethical and participatory system, safeguarded against corruption, manipulation, and authoritarian excesses through institutional checks, civic vigilance, and continuous public scrutiny.

Within the Malaysian political context, Anwar's pursuit of popular sovereignty emphasises the primacy of consultation (*shura*) and transparent negotiations, positioning these as essential democratic mechanisms. This ethos ensures leaders remain deeply attuned to public aspirations, thus reinforcing political accountability and ethical governance (Zakiyuddin, 2015). Furthermore, referencing Indonesian nationalist Mohammad Hatta, Anwar accentuates that true popular sovereignty involves active citizen participation, where leaders exercise authority delegated by the populace, accountable for decisions directly influencing national development and societal welfare (Mohamad Raimi, 2017).

Significantly, Anwar Ibrahim's interpretation of popular sovereignty incorporates active cultivation of democratic consciousness among citizens. He envisions a citizenry well-informed and actively involved in political processes, inherently resistant to authoritarian manipulations or electoral malpractices such as fraud or coercion. Such democratic resilience is not merely procedural but cultural—embedded deeply into the fabric of civic life—facilitating robust protection against potential abuses of power and ensuring the sustained integrity of democratic institutions.

In practical terms, Anwar's governance reforms aim to institutionalise mechanisms that consistently reinforce accountability, including rigorous electoral reforms, enhanced transparency in governance, and strengthened civic education. These initiatives ensure the people's collective voice remains integral to policy formulation and governmental accountability, reinforcing the sovereignty of citizen authority within Malaysia's democratic fabric.

Ultimately, Anwar Ibrahim's reform agenda posits the sovereignty of the people's power as indispensable in transforming Malaysia's political landscape. This concept goes beyond the mere practice of electoral democracy, aspiring instead to embed a participatory, accountable, and transparent democratic culture. Through this approach, Anwar seeks to cultivate a resilient democratic ethos that actively resists authoritarian tendencies, thereby contributing significantly to Malaysia's evolving identity as an inclusive, democratic nation.

The struggle for economic justice

Central to Anwar Ibrahim's extensive political and ideological trajectory is his unwavering commitment to

economic justice. This commitment is deeply rooted in his early activism, notably exemplified by his involvement in the Baling protests of 1974, which addressed the socio-economic plight of rural communities and farmers systematically marginalised by government policies (Ahmad Baha, 2009). Anwar's consistent advocacy underscores the fundamental belief that equitable economic distribution is crucial not merely for national economic growth but as an essential moral imperative to ensure societal stability and prosperity.

Anwar's intellectual grounding in economic justice is significantly informed by Islamic economic principles, particularly the concepts of *maslahah* and *hisbah* which prioritise collective well-being and ethical oversight in economic transactions (Allers, 2013). His tenure as Finance Minister during the 1990s was marked by efforts to integrate these ethical principles into practical economic policy, notably through initiatives aimed at poverty reduction and sustainable development. Moreover, his formulation of the 1998 State Budget and its alignment with Pakatan Rakyat's 2013 People's Manifesto illustrates a strategic continuity in prioritising inclusive economic growth and distributive fairness.

The theoretical framework of Anwar's economic justice advocacy aligns closely with broader scholarly discourses critiquing the inequities perpetuated by capitalist structures. Siddiq (2018) highlights Anwar's persistent call for economic structures that not only promote inclusive growth but actively dismantle systemic inequalities that widen the gap between the impoverished and the affluent. This position resonates with global humanitarian ideals, recognising economic disparities as central impediments to achieving genuine social equity and cohesion.

Furthermore, Anwar's approach to economic justice explicitly challenges dominant capitalist paradigms that frequently marginalise vulnerable communities. His advocacy calls for a humanistic economic model designed to mitigate the adverse impacts of market-driven inequities and unchecked capitalist exploitation, aligning with Ihwan et al. (2019), who emphasise economic justice as a crucial mechanism for sustainable and equitable economic development. Anwar argues for the necessity of regulatory frameworks informed by ethical and moral considerations, underscoring the role of governance in protecting economically disadvantaged groups from systemic exploitation.

Practically, Anwar's policy proposals consistently incorporate mechanisms to ensure equitable wealth distribution, sustainable economic growth, and poverty alleviation. His governmental roles and political leadership have focused on institutional reforms to enhance transparency, accountability, and ethical governance, directly confronting the systemic corruption that exacerbates economic disparities (Elias, 2008; Maszlee, 2019). By advocating rigorous anti-corruption measures, Anwar underscores his belief that ethical governance is intrinsically linked to economic justice, positing corruption as an economic injustice undermining national prosperity and public trust.

In the contemporary Malaysian context, Anwar's economic justice agenda addresses critical issues such as unemployment, rural poverty, and income inequality, advocating comprehensive policy interventions aimed at equitable development. These interventions encompass educational reform, vocational training, targeted subsidies, and infrastructural investments designed to uplift economically disenfranchised communities, particularly in rural and marginalised urban areas.

Ultimately, Anwar Ibrahim's struggle for economic justice represents a transformative vision for Malaysia's socio-economic landscape. By integrating ethical principles with pragmatic governance, Anwar seeks to redefine Malaysia's economic paradigm, establishing a robust foundation for inclusive prosperity, social cohesion, and national stability. His ideological commitment and practical policy engagements significantly contribute to scholarly discourses on economic reform and equitable governance, positioning Malaysia towards achieving sustained socio-economic equity in the post-Reformasi era.

Combating corruption and abuse of power among the ruling elite

Central to Anwar Ibrahim's reformist vision is an uncompromising commitment to combating corruption and the systemic abuse of power, particularly within Malaysia's ruling elite. Corruption, described by Huntington

as "a disease of democracy and modernity" (Fajlurrahman, 2016), poses a significant threat to the integrity of governance, societal trust, and economic stability. Anwar Ibrahim's resolute stance against this endemic problem reflects a deeply held belief that corruption fundamentally undermines social equity, distorts economic fairness, and corrodes democratic institutions.

Corruption in Malaysia has been characterised as systemic and deeply entrenched, permeating various levels of governmental authority and significantly impairing public welfare (Muhammad Hatta, 2019). Anwar recognises that such systemic corruption not only siphons critical state resources meant for public good but also entrenches socio-economic disparities, exacerbating the struggles faced by economically marginalised groups. He explicitly links corruption with broader social injustice, affirming that corruption disproportionately affects those already vulnerable, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality (Denny, 2011; Muhammad Haniffuddin, 2018).

Upon assuming office within the administration of Mahathir Mohamad, Anwar Ibrahim actively pursued comprehensive legislative reforms aimed at enhancing governmental transparency and accountability. Notably, he initiated critical revisions to the Anti-Corruption Act of 1997, ensuring that public officials could be held accountable for corrupt activities even after leaving office (Elias, 2008). This significant legal reform was emblematic of Anwar's determination to dismantle entrenched impunity among political elites and to reinforce principles of ethical governance across the public sector.

Anwar's approach extends beyond punitive legal frameworks to incorporate preventive and educational dimensions. He strongly advocates for public awareness and civic education as integral components in combating corruption. Emphasising the importance of informed, active citizenry, Anwar promotes the concept that effective governance accountability is fundamentally rooted in civic vigilance and public participation. He argues that citizens must be educated to critically scrutinise the actions of their leaders, thereby preventing the passive acceptance of abuses of power (Siddiq, 2018). This educational strategy aligns with his broader philosophical belief that accountability and ethical governance are most effectively sustained through an informed, engaged, and empowered populace.

Moreover, Anwar Ibrahim consistently underscores the ethical responsibilities of leadership, reflecting Islamic moral traditions and broader humanitarian values. His emphasis on leaders as trustees who must exercise their authority ethically and transparently directly challenges traditional perceptions of political power as personal entitlement or privilege (Anwar, 1989). By foregrounding principles of trust and accountability, Anwar seeks to recalibrate societal expectations of political leadership, cultivating a governance culture grounded in moral integrity and public service.

Institutionally, Anwar advocates strengthening oversight mechanisms such as independent anti-corruption commissions and judicial institutions free from political interference. Such structural reforms aim to embed transparency deeply within Malaysia's governance architecture, systematically reducing opportunities for corruption and misuse of power by ruling elites. Anwar's proactive measures include advocating stronger legislative safeguards, institutional autonomy, and rigorous enforcement mechanisms to reinforce a culture of integrity and accountability (Maszlee, 2019).

Ultimately, Anwar Ibrahim's robust anti-corruption agenda is foundational to his broader vision of democratic renewal and nation-building in post-Reformasi Malaysia. By strategically combining legislative reform, civic education, and moral leadership, he presents a holistic model for addressing corruption's entrenched roots and its detrimental societal impacts. Anwar's sustained commitment positions Malaysia on a transformative trajectory towards enhanced governance, restored public trust, and equitable socio-economic advancement, fundamentally reshaping political leadership and national identity in the modern Malaysian context.

Strengthening a dynamic cultural identity

Anwar Ibrahim's reformist agenda envisions cultural identity not as a fixed inheritance, but as a dynamic, living force that shapes and is shaped by a pluralistic, democratic society. Central to this vision is the belief

that a cohesive and inclusive national identity must be nurtured through mutual respect, intercultural dialogue, and a commitment to universal moral values. As a deeply multicultural nation, Malaysia's strength lies in its ability to embrace diversity without surrendering to fragmentation. For Anwar, the reinforcement of cultural identity is not about ethno-centric preservation or nostalgic essentialism, but rather about cultivating a resilient, forward-looking Malaysian identity rooted in ethical pluralism and shared values.

This principle is grounded in Anwar's philosophical reflections and political writings, notably in *The Asian Renaissance*, where he argues for a cultural reawakening anchored in Asian traditions yet open to global discourses on justice, equity, and liberty. He upholds that cultural identity must be both rooted and adaptive—strong enough to preserve dignity and distinctiveness, yet flexible enough to evolve amid global currents and modernity (Siddiq, 2018). This dynamic approach transcends parochialism and fosters an open society that thrives on cultural interaction and mutual enrichment.

Islamic values play a foundational role in this cultural discourse. Drawing upon Quranic principles such as those articulated in *Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13)*, Anwar emphasises that humanity was created into nations and tribes not to sow division, but to foster understanding and solidarity. Cultural identity, in this sense, becomes a divine imperative for mutual recognition and ethical engagement. Anwar's interpretation of these values asserts that Malaysia's cultural pluralism is not a challenge to be managed, but an asset to be celebrated—a vehicle for moral excellence and national harmony.

In practical governance, Anwar advocates policies that elevate cultural literacy, support the arts, and empower marginalised cultural communities. His agenda seeks to institutionalise platforms for inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue, thus countering the rise of ethnocentrism, chauvinism, and sectarian populism that threaten social cohesion (Bakir & Cucu, 2020; Aksin Wijaya, 2018). His leadership prioritises education reforms that include a critical appreciation of Malaysia's diverse cultural narratives, equipping citizens with the intellectual tools to transcend inherited prejudices and embrace diversity as a source of collective strength.

Anwar also situates cultural identity within the framework of universal human rights. By advocating for a society where cultural differences are not just tolerated but valorised, he bridges cultural specificity with universal ethics. He posits that an enlightened cultural identity must affirm gender equality, freedom of expression, and social justice, thereby rejecting any form of cultural relativism that justifies exclusion or repression. In this regard, cultural identity becomes a platform for both rootedness and reform, a space where tradition and transformation can co-exist in productive tension.

Institutionally, Anwar's reform trajectory envisions cultural development as integral to national development. He calls for cultural policies that promote the dignity of all ethnic groups while cultivating a shared national ethos. This ethos, while plural in its expression, is unified by a commitment to justice, civility, and the public good. His vision offers a counter-narrative to the politicisation of ethnicity and religion that has long dominated Malaysia's political landscape, seeking instead to foster a civic nationalism based on shared responsibilities and mutual respect.

Ultimately, Anwar Ibrahim's commitment to strengthening a dynamic cultural identity reflects his broader reformist philosophy: that political renewal must be accompanied by cultural transformation. In redefining leadership and nationhood, he positions cultural identity not as a divisive fault line, but as a generative force for unity, ethical governance, and inclusive nation-building. This reform agenda aspires to elevate Malaysia as a beacon of intercultural harmony, moral integrity, and democratic resilience in the heart of Southeast Asia.

Building a civilised nation

Anwar Ibrahim's vision of building a civilised nation forms the culminating pillar of his reformist agenda, encapsulating his aspirations for an ethically grounded, socially cohesive, and forward-looking Malaysia. This notion of a national civilization (*tamadun bangsa*) is not restricted to material development or institutional sophistication; rather, it is a holistic paradigm rooted in values of justice, compassion, mutual respect, and universal human dignity. Drawing from Islamic civilisation, classical sociological thought, and contemporary democratic ideals, Anwar envisions Malaysia as a nation that exemplifies moral excellence, participatory

governance, and cultural pluralism—integrated harmoniously within the global community (Hassan, 2016; Baderin, 2003).

The civilised nation, in Anwar's framework, transcends administrative orderliness or legal formalism. Instead, it entails the cultivation of *akhlaqiyyah siyasiyyah*—a political morality that informs both leaders and citizens in their respective roles. In this regard, the role of leadership is not merely to wield power, but to guide society ethically, to uphold justice in law enforcement, and to safeguard the common good. Echoing Ibn Khaldun's sociological analysis in the *Muqaddimah*, Anwar understands civilisation as a dynamic process in which state institutions evolve towards perfection by embodying moral authority and social responsibility (Hassan, 2016).

Central to this vision is the belief that a civilised Malaysia must reflect the values of justice (*'adl*), empathy (*rahmah*), and truth (*haqq*). These values, as espoused in the Quranic worldview and affirmed by global human rights discourse, are not abstract ideals but operational principles that must govern economic management, social policy, and cultural engagement. Anwar explicitly links civilisation to justice, arguing that without distributive fairness and equal access to opportunity, any claim to civilisational advancement would be hollow and unsustainable (Muhammad Junaidi, 2016).

Moreover, Anwar situates the development of a civilised nation within the multicultural and multireligious context of Malaysia. He asserts that civilisation in Malaysia must emerge not from the dominance of a single culture or ethnicity, but from the dynamic interplay of its diverse traditions and communities. His writings and speeches call for a form of *madaniyah*—civic virtue and inclusive citizenship—where every Malaysian, regardless of background, contributes to and benefits from national progress (Baderin, 2003; Bakir & Cucu, 2020).

In policy terms, this agenda involves investing in human capital development, strengthening institutions of justice and education, and ensuring that technological and economic advancements do not come at the expense of moral and social values. Anwar's civilisational vision also embraces environmental stewardship, ethical capitalism, and global solidarity—reflecting his aspiration for Malaysia to be not just an economically competitive nation, but a moral exemplar on the world stage (Mahathir, 2011; Abd. Kadir, 2022).

Critically, Anwar rejects authoritarian interpretations of civilisation that prioritise control over empowerment. For him, a truly civilised nation is one in which democratic participation flourishes, where dissent is valued as a form of engagement, and where governance is conducted with humility and accountability. This democratic maturity is seen as essential for sustaining long-term peace, societal resilience, and national dignity.

In essence, Anwar Ibrahim's aspiration to build a civilised nation represents the synthesis of his entire reformist philosophy. It binds together his commitments to justice, human dignity, cultural pluralism, and democratic governance under a unifying moral vision. In reshaping political leadership and national identity in post-Reformasi Malaysia, Anwar presents a blueprint for civilisation that is ethically grounded, socially inclusive, and globally engaged. His leadership seeks not only to transform Malaysia structurally, but to inspire a new political culture grounded in moral excellence, civic responsibility, and shared humanity.

CONCLUSION

Anwar Ibrahim's ascension as Malaysia's reformist leader in the post-Reformasi era has fundamentally redefined the country's political leadership ethos and the very conception of nationhood. Grounded in seven core reform agendas—spanning the sanctity of human dignity, universal justice, democratic empowerment, equitable prosperity, staunch anti-corruption, cultural pluralism, and the vision of a “civilised” nation—his leadership approach shifted Malaysian politics onto a more inclusive and ethical foundation. Each of these reform pillars reinforced a departure from the divisive, authoritarian practices of the past towards a governance paradigm rooted in integrity, accountability, and multicultural coexistence. In championing human dignity (*karamah insaniyah*) alongside principled justice and accountable governance, Anwar articulated a transformative socio-political agenda aspiring toward a Malaysia characterised by ethical leadership, social equity, and robust democratic participation. This inclusive vision of nationhood, which elevates civic nationalism over sectarian interests, has helped to heal longstanding cleavages by fostering shared values of

mutual respect, compassion, and rule of law in the public sphere.

Crucially, Anwar's reformist leadership has left an indelible mark on Malaysia's democratic evolution and reformist ethos. His unwavering commitment to moral integrity and popular sovereignty has not only translated reformist ideals into tangible institutional changes but also embedded a new reformasi political culture at the heart of Malaysian governance. As a once persecuted dissident-turned-premier, Anwar epitomises the possibility of democratic renewal: he has demonstrated how enduring idealism, coupled with pragmatic statecraft, can realign a nation's trajectory towards greater justice and inclusivity. The significance of this leadership extends beyond Malaysia's borders, enriching scholarly and policy discourses within Southeast Asia on the interplay between Islamic universal values, ethical governance, and modern nation-building. In essence, Anwar Ibrahim's legacy as a reformist leader lies in providing a bold new blueprint for political leadership – one that binds together integrity, pluralism and social justice – thereby positioning Malaysia as a beacon of intercultural harmony, ethical governance, and democratic resilience in the region. His transformative contributions have decisively shaped Malaysia's national identity and political future, imprinting a reformist vision that is both deeply rooted in Malaysian society and resonant with broader global ideals of democracy and human dignity.

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