

Article

Anwar Ibrahim's Civilisational Populism: The Gaza War and Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper examines how Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's tenth prime minister, employs civilisational populism in shaping his foreign policy rhetoric, particularly during the Gaza War that started in 2023. Through the lens of civilisational populism defined by Yilmaz and Morieson as a political strategy that constructs "the people" as defenders of a superior but threatened civilisation, the paper argues that Anwar leverages the Gaza/Palestinian cause to project Islamic solidarity and deflect domestic criticisms of liberalism. In doing so, he seeks to consolidate support against the conservative Islamist opposition, PAS, while maintaining international legitimacy. Drawing on the framework of Foreign Policy Decision Making (FPDM), the study emphasizes the role of individual agency, cognitive calculations, and domestic political pressures in guiding Malaysia's external stance. Anwar's rhetorical and symbolic actions such as mass rallies, public condemnations of Israel, and economic restrictions on Israeli-linked entities are analysed not simply as moral positioning but as calculated decisions aimed at managing political survival within a fragmented coalition. The paper highlights contradictions in this approach, such as the BlackRock controversy and local backlash over prioritizing Palestinian aid over domestic needs, revealing the tension between foreign policy idealism and domestic political pragmatism. By integrating FPDM with civilisational populism, the paper provides an understanding of how Malaysia's foreign policy is not purely reactive or interest-based but shaped by identity politics, leadership perception, and populist imperatives.

Keywords: Anwar Ibrahim; Malaysia; civilisational populism; foreign policy; Gaza War; Palestine; Islamic solidarity; populist rhetoric; domestic politics; identity politics; PAS; leadership agency

Introduction

The pendulum of civilisationism has swung. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, humanity entered an era of globalisation where connectivity prevailed. However, it did not last, and now that we are in the third decade of the 21st century, we are referring back to Samuel Huntington's most well-known work, which states that civilisation will be the basis for clashes. In the 1990s, the Washington Consensus fostered a wave of neoliberal globalization, making civilisational divisions seem unlikely. However, following the devastating events of 2001, these divisions have become more apparent, especially against Islamic civilisation. Instead of all-out war, the divisions we are seeing occurs within the framework of national elections. Politicians today are increasingly using civilisationism as part of their populist strategies to win votes.

According to Yilmaz and Morieson, civilisational populism is a political ideology that combines elements of populism with a civilisational framework. It involves a discourse that portrays a particular civilisation—often religious or cultural—as superior and under threat from outsiders or other civilisations. They argued, *“populist uses of civilisational discourses differ from non-populist discourses insofar as they use civilisationism to construct internal divisions between an ingroup who they claim belong to ‘our’ civilisation (‘the people’), and outgroups (‘elites,’ ‘others’) who they claim have either betrayed the civilisation of the people or belong to a threatening foreign civilisation,”* (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022: 8).

This form of populism appeals to sentiments of cultural heritage, identity, and belonging by positioning "the people" as defenders of their civilisation against perceived existential threats.

For this paper, we are looking at civilisational populism and its impact beyond the nation-state. We argue that Anwar Ibrahim, the tenth prime minister of Malaysia, has been involved with civilisational rhetoric for the purpose of gaining support. Domestically, Anwar's main political rival is the Islamist Malaysian Pan-Islamic Party (PAS). Shukri (2023) argued that PAS definitely participated in the civilisational narrative of Islam against non-Muslims, specifically non-Muslim Chinese of Malaysia. On the other hand, Anwar, as argued by Shukri (2024), is more of an inclusivist populist. There is heightened political tension in Malaysia between the Islamists that get support from the majority Malay population and Anwar's own coalition that is usually labelled derogatorily as “liberal” and finds support among non-Muslims and urban Malays. Due to this pressure, Anwar needs to portray himself as a “defender” of Malays and

Muslims but in a civilisational way beyond Muslims in Malaysia in order to maintain his inclusivist reputation. Specifically, this paper will look at Anwar's rhetoric on the Israel-Gaza War that erupted in October 2023.

Anwar has established himself as an Islamist since his days as a youth leader, and he later transitioned to become a Muslim democrat (Malik & Shukri, 2018). However, we observe that his more assertive rhetoric since becoming prime minister is slightly different from his days as the deputy prime minister under Mahathir Mohamad's first administration. As a result, it may have led to intra-civilisational discord with other Muslim countries, such as with Saudi Arabia, albeit before the start of the ongoing war, when he was unable to meet either the king or the crown prince during his first visit as prime minister.

The next section will look at Malaysian politics and Anwar Ibrahim's background. Next, we will look at the literature on civilisational populism and foreign policy decision making in order to provide a framework to guide our understanding of Anwar's rhetoric about Palestine, Gaza, and the Muslim world. Following that, we will delve deeper into Anwar's civilisational populism and his relationship with other Muslim leaders. The penultimate section will discuss the impact of Anwar's civilisational rhetoric in the broader Muslim world context.

Background on Malaysia and Anwar Ibrahim

Malaysia has been independent since 1957. For more than six decades, the country was governed by the Barisan Nasional coalition, which is an umbrella coalition of multiple political parties. As a heterogeneous nation with multiple ethnicities, Malaysian politics is very much ethnic-based. Its form of consociational politics within grand coalitions was able to manage and ensure stability in the nation under subsequent Barisan Nasional prime ministers. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of global Islamization, which did not spare Malaysia. Malay-Muslim youth were returning back from their studies abroad in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries where they were exposed to *dakwah* and study groups among themselves (Anwar, 1987). Even those who studied in Malaysia were exposed to *dakwah* movements that increased Islamic awareness among the Malays in the 1970s. The Islamist party PAS was poised to benefit as it claims to be the party that seeks to implement a form of Islamist politics and governance in the country.

Anwar Ibrahim was among those youth leaders as one of the founders of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Association, or Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM). As a youth leader, he was very outspoken, especially about helping the marginalised. ABIM was also interested in the "Islamization of Knowledge" project, in which they believe Muslim youth needed to be instilled with Islamic values in addition to empirical and scientific knowledge (Hortsmann, 2004). Rumours even circulated that Anwar, an Islamist leader himself, was planning to join PAS. Alas, the nation was surprised when he chose to join Umno under Mahathir's administration in 1982.

The fourth prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, governed from 1981 until 2003. Mahathir's rule has been well-documented and analysed. Among the contributions of Mahathir as prime minister is the bureaucratisation of Islam, which started in the 1980s (Liow, 2009). During this time, Mahathir introduced Islamization policies as a way to prove that his administration was just as Islamic as PAS. Instead of being purely for political purposes, it also shows Mahathir's understanding of the current zeitgeist of the Malay population. As part of his Islamization Project, Mahathir promoted the integration of Islamic values in public administration. This involved shaping civil service standards to align with Islamic ethics and principles, advocating for a workforce that embraced Islamic values in its day-to-day governance and operations. Institutionally, Mahathir formed the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) to promote and institutionalise Islamic teachings and principles throughout Malaysia. Together with Anwar as Minister of Education in 1986, Mahathir also focused on education reforms. Efforts were made to embed Islamic teachings within the national educational curriculum, fostering an environment where Islamic values could be imparted from an early age. The establishment of International Islamic University Malaysia is considered part of Mahathir's Islamization agenda. Thirty years later, the product of this education system, a more Islamically conservative Malay population, fully feels the impact.

Internationally, Mahathir is known for his diatribe against Israel and even claimed a Jewish conspiracy that "Jews control the world" (Kuppusamy, 2003). This was ongoing even before he made the statement about Malaysia being an Islamic state after 9/11. Since there are relatively no Jews in Malaysia (Yegar, 2006; Alatas, 2020), it is clear that the primary target of such rhetoric is Malaysia's Muslim-majority domestic audience. In *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, Nair (1997) examines how Mahathir Mohamad's foreign policy combined Islamic

solidarity with pragmatic diplomacy. In reaction to Western support for Israel, Mahathir strongly criticised the United States for arming Israel and for what he described as its hypocrisy and selective concern for human rights. Beyond economic relations, Nair recounts an incident in which an Israeli delegation met in Israel with a Malaysian royal, prompting public controversy that led the government to revoke the prince's passport. Reports later emerged that Mahathir himself held a discreet meeting in France with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in July 1994. These developments drew sharp domestic responses with PAS condemning any move toward formal recognition of Israel, while UMNO Youth controversially urging the government to consider diplomatic engagement, invoking examples of historical Muslim–Jewish coexistence to justify their position

The relationship between Mahathir and Anwar soured, and in 1998, Anwar was fired from his position as the deputy prime minister and from UMNO. Anwar launched the "Reformasi" movement, which mobilised Malaysians against Mahathir and Barisan Nasional. Initially, Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) worked with PAS, but PAS later went its own way in 2015 due to disagreement with another partner, the secular and Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP). Anwar, on the other hand, is willing to work with secular and non-Islamist political partners for the greater good.

With PAS in another camp, Anwar led the Pakatan Harapan coalition against Barisan Nasional and PAS' Perikatan Nasional during the 2022 general election. If Barisan Nasional is seen as a centre-right conservative coalition dedicated to defending the status quo of Malaysia's delicate ethnic power balance, Perikatan Nasional is a far-right reactionary coalition that seeks to form a political system based on Malay and Muslim superiority within the framework of Islamic governance. Anwar leads Pakatan Harapan, a centre-left party purportedly committed to progressive politics. Pakatan Harapan won a plurality in the 2022 general election, but it did not win enough seats to form a single-coalition government. As a result, Pakatan Harapan decided to work together with Barisan Nasional and the Borneo-based Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) to form the federal government.

It was within this so-called unity government that Anwar had to do political manoeuvring to maintain parliamentary support from his partners. On top of that, Anwar, just like his previous mentor Mahathir Mohamad, had to prove that his government is just as committed to the Malay

cause and in maintaining Islam's special position as the religion of the federation. Perikatan Nasional paints Anwar and his Unity Government as being too lax when it comes to matters of Islam, such as when the Federal Court of Malaysia held that the Kelantan State Legislative Assembly did not have the power to enact 16 Sharia laws pertaining to criminal matters (Achariam, 2025). Unfortunately, a strictly legal matter was politicised by PAS as the failure of Anwar's administration to defend the rights of Muslims in Malaysia.

Civilisational Populism and Foreign-Policy Decision Making

Populism is a political ideology and movement that arises from the dissatisfaction and economic grievances of the general population. At its core, populism seeks to articulate the frustrations and aspirations of "ordinary" people, especially in opposition to perceived elitist structures and entities (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Economic grievances featured in traditional populism often emerge when large segments of the population feel disenfranchised. This could be due to rising unemployment, wage stagnation, or the perceived inefficacy of governmental policies in addressing key economic concerns. In such contexts, populist leaders often promise radical economic reforms that claim to prioritize the welfare of the majority over the interests of the few (Weyland, 2001). This can be seen historically by populist leaders of Latin America such as Hugo Chavez, who pursued a distinctly redistributive agenda through his "Bolivarian Revolution." He framed these policies as a moral struggle against neoliberal elites and foreign exploitation, positioning himself as the voice of the *pueblo* (the people) and the defender of economic sovereignty against capitalist and imperialist forces.

Anti-elitism and anti-establishment play a critical role in defining populism. The movement typically frames its rhetoric around the notion that a small, privileged elite has usurped the power and resources that rightfully belong to the people. These elites are often portrayed as being out of touch with the needs and values of ordinary citizens and are blamed for various societal woes. This anti-elitist sentiment not only targets political figures but also extends to corporate executives, media personalities, and any other figures perceived as holding disproportionate influence over societal affairs. The 2016 Brexit campaign epitomises anti-establishment populism by portraying the European Union as an unaccountable elite institution. This aligns with Eatwell and Goodwin's (2018) four-D framework, which attributes the rise of

nationalist populism to distrust of elites, perceived cultural destruction, relative deprivation, and political dealignment.

Economic grievances and anti-elitism are usually related within traditional populism. Economic hardships such as the 2008 Recession often amplify anti-elitist sentiments, providing fertile ground for populist ideas to take root. This synergy can lead to powerful political movements that challenge existing power structures, advocating for reforms that they argue will result in a more equitable redistribution of wealth and opportunities. Conversely, it may not gain traction, such as the Occupy Movement, a loosely organized, leaderless protest against economic inequality and corporate greed that emerged in 2011 under the slogan “*We are the 99%.*” Although it captured global attention and reshaped discourse on inequality, it struggled to translate its moral outrage into lasting institutional or political change.

From economic-based inclusivist populism, we are seeing the rise of cultural-based exclusivist populism. In Cas Mudde's 2007 book, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe Today*, he explores the emergence and growth of right-wing populism across Europe. Mudde identifies how these parties, characterized by their nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-establishment rhetoric, have increasingly gained traction among the electorate by exploiting fears of immigration, economic instability, and cultural change. Their success is also attributed to strategic framing of issues, media savvy, and adaptation to national contexts, allowing populists to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters across different demographic and socio-economic groups. Mudde's analysis sheds light on how the rise of these parties challenges the democratic norms and liberal values prevalent in post-war Europe.

With the rise of Donald Trump in 2016, we have been seeing more clearly the rise of civilisational populism. Civilisational populism is a form of political expression that taps into the cultural, historical, and religious consciousness of societies to form a cohesive political identity (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). Diverging from traditional populism, which is typically characterized by economic discontent and opposition to the elite that leads to inclusivist populism, civilisational populism leans heavily on the shared cultural heritage and historical experiences of a people vis-à-vis a group of “others,” using these as rallying points for political mileage (Brubaker, 2017; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023).

One of the central tenets of civilisational populism is the concept of cultural identity. This approach posits that specific cultural characteristics and traditions form the core of a civilisation's identity. By emphasizing these cultural elements, civilisational populism seeks to foster a strong sense of belonging among its followers. It often draws upon a romanticized version of history, celebrating cultural achievements and revered traditions. For this reason, we are seeing the rise of reactionary politics that speaks of a glorified past through slogans such as “Make America Great Again” or “Naya Pakistan.” These cultural narratives are effective in rallying support by appealing to the populace's desire to preserve and celebrate their unique way of life.

Historical narratives enrich the discourse of civilisational populism by invoking the collective memory of a people. These narratives frequently focus on significant historical milestones, whether they are glorious victories or moments of suffering and struggle. Such stories serve to legitimize contemporary political agendas by framing the modern era as a continuation of past struggles or achievements. We can see that in Turkey's celebration of its Ottoman past especially in its foreign policy (Yavuz, 2020). By painting a picture of historical continuity, civilisational populism fosters a sense of pride and shared destiny among its constituency. This can be particularly potent in galvanizing support during times of perceived cultural or political threat.

Religious narratives provide another powerful layer to civilisational populism, tapping into foundational beliefs and values. These narratives often invoke religious symbols, traditions, and sacred texts to mobilize supporters. By framing political endeavours as aligned with divine will or reflecting a moral struggle between good and evil, civilisational populists lend spiritual and emotional depth to their messages (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023). The infusion of religion into political narratives can unite followers behind a shared sense of purpose and moral clarity, transcending mere political allegiance and touching on profound aspects of identity and morality. For example, Narendra Modi is a populist leader in India who champions the Hindutva movement in India to establish the country as a Hindu-first nation (Vasudeva, 2025).

Islamist populism is a variant of populist mobilization in which Islamic identity and normative claims are central to the “people vs. elites” divide. Islamist populism is seen as a subtype or hybrid of civilisational populism whereby the civilisational boundary is drawn along religious lines of the *ummah* versus antagonistic (often Western) civilisations. Thus, the difference is

often more one of emphasis and scale (religious identity vs. civilisational boundary) than an absolute divide. Nevertheless, civilisational populism allows for non-Islamist forms such as Christian-civilisational populism, whereas Islamist populism is specifically rooted in Islamic frames.

Through the interplay of cultural, historical, and religious themes, civilisational populism presents a compelling vision of identity that goes beyond nationality or economic class. It provides followers with a sense of community and continuity, reinforcing social bonds and legitimizing political power. Wajner (2022) explores the transnational expansion and evolving nature of contemporary populism by highlighting how populist leaders project national struggles onto the international stage to gain legitimacy.

Civilisational populism had spill over into foreign policy consideration, utilizing the political culture (identity politics) to the populist favour by framing and representing the issues to benefit the interest of decision makers. This action invokes questions; what are the considerations of the decision makers? Who decides an interest to become national interest? Foreign Policy Decision-Making, which is a component of Foreign Policy Analysis, includes an analysis of cognitive, psychological and organizational aspects of decision-making (Brulé & Mintz, 2010). This approach provides a suitable element to complement this article towards understanding the civilisational populist rhetoric of Anwar Ibrahim for domestic political incentives.

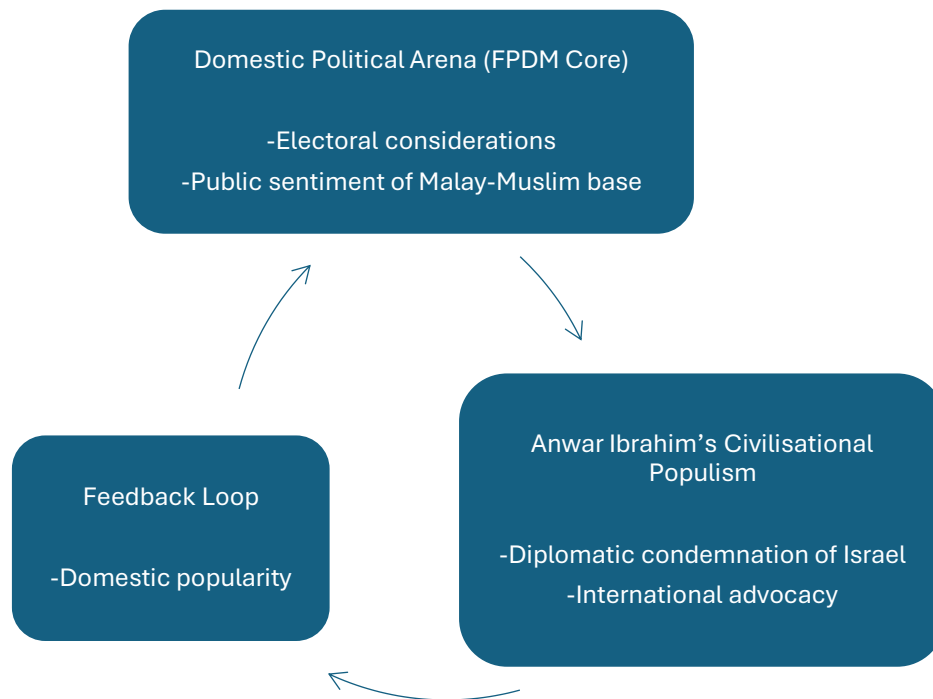
Foreign policy is not constructed in a vacuum. Graham Allison (1969) analysed that foreign policy of a state was decided rationally. The decisions made by the authority are calculated and not just a response without any consideration. The priorities were ranked, the purpose and objectives were established, and the states maximize their national interest or utility. This assumption was summarized as a generalization of states' process in making a sound judgement on foreign policy decisions. While it may be true, Allison also contributed to the discussion by providing two other main models to understand Foreign Policy besides rationality: Organizational Process and Bureaucratic Process.

The Malaysian House of Representative had set up a Special Select Committee of International Relations and Trade in 2019 to help further its sound judgement and democratizing decision-

making process of foreign policy. Lam Chong Wah (2023) had argued that the parliamentary debates of foreign affairs had minimal effects on government's substantive motions but a good platform for agenda setting (framing and representing concerns). Opposition could and would utilize this platform to showcase their disagreement with the government to jeopardize support for its authority. To sustain support, government policies must align with the interests of the majority; otherwise, rejecting such policies may be interpreted as a withdrawal of support for the government itself.

David Cadier (2024) acknowledges the use of foreign policy as a political instrument for domestic gain, arguing that it can be mobilised to vilify both internal and external adversaries. His analysis highlights how political leaders weaponize foreign policy to extend domestic ideological battles beyond their borders. While Cadier does not examine the cultural or civilisational dimension of this phenomenon, his framework helps explain how leaders use foreign policy discourse to shape internal legitimacy. In Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim demonstrates a similar dynamic of using moral and civilisational narratives, particularly on issues such as Gaza, to assert Malaysia's autonomy on the world stage while reinforcing his domestic image as a defender of Islamic and national identity. Alas, domestic factors still play an important role to Foreign Policy Decision-Making process as supported by Robert Putnam (1988) in his classic writing, *Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games*.

Anwar's rhetoric on global affairs reflects the politicization of foreign policy. While this situation can be partially explained by Social Constructivist theory which emphasizes the construction of state behaviour based on belief, identity, and norms, it fails to fully account for Anwar's selective stance on certain issues. The state construction of foreign policy grounded in Malaysia's historical Islamic culture can be seen as a metaphysical abstraction due to the use of the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. However, Foreign Policy Decision Making offers a more comprehensive explanation for the case of civilisational populism in foreign policy. It shifts the focus from a state-centric discourse to the individual decision-maker as the "locus of theoretical integration across levels of analysis" (Snyder et al., 2003).



Anwar Ibrahim's Civilisational Populism

When Anwar Ibrahim was Deputy Prime Minister, and especially after his controversial dismissal from office, he was known to be somewhat of a pro-western liberal. Allers (2014: 13) wrote, "*Anwar's relationship with western interests was much more copasetic [vis-à-vis Mahathir].*" And when the court found Anwar guilty on corruption and sodomy charges, "*western leaders were much more vociferous in their condemnation*" (Allers, 2014: 140). While Mahathir was very harsh in his anti-western and anti-Israel rhetoric, especially after 9/11, Anwar has had a more conciliatory note. So much so that when he became prime minister in 2022, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz wrote, "*Israel would love closer ties with Kuala Lumpur*" (Haaretz and Reuters, 2022). The Muslim population in Malaysia has even accused him of being a "liberal," implying that they cannot trust him when it comes to matter of the Islamic faith. This accusation came regardless of his many years as an Islamist youth leader and his role in the Islamization of Malaysia during Mahathir's administration. Anwar even wrote in *the Asian Renaissance* that it is time for Asia to take its place in the world without abandoning its values and culture. In the book, Anwar described "*Asia's economic progress is, in fact, a boon because it has enabled Asia to rediscover its soul and to reconstruct its civilisations. Inevitably this process will necessitate civilisational dialogue between the East*

and the West,” (Ibrahim, 1996: 13). This articulation reflects Anwar’s long-standing attempt to reconcile modernisation with moral and cultural authenticity.

Nonetheless, in his first televised interview as prime minister, Anwar made it clear that his administration would maintain the status quo by rejecting any move to recognise secularism or LGBTQ rights that contradict Islam as the religion of the federation (Nizam, 2023). This stance contrasted with the expectations of many of his long-time supporters who tend to champion greater equality and inclusivity within a democratic framework. Yet Anwar’s position was not only grounded in constitutional realities but also shaped by political pragmatism. Facing a formidable Islamist opposition eager to portray him as a threat to Malay and Muslim interests, Anwar had to strike a careful balance between upholding democratic ideals and defending his Islamic credentials in the eyes of the majority.

A year after Anwar came to power, the world was shocked by Israel’s attack on Gaza, which has at the time of writing left more than 67,000 people dead (Yilmaz, 2025) in retaliation for 1400 people killed and 200 hostages kidnapped by Hamas. Malaysia is, of course, halfway across the globe from Palestine, but the people are very well attuned to the suffering of Palestinians, as they are seen as brothers and sisters in Islam. This is part of the civilisational discourse on the Ummah as a group of people with a shared identity. Muslims in Malaysia had been steadfast in their anger towards Israel by leading the boycotting movement, especially towards symbols of American capitalism that are perceived to have contributed to the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in one way or another. Anwar has been one with the people. The question now is: How much of his actions are part of the political need to show that he is with “the people” to counter narratives of being a so-called liberal elite in Malaysia?

On October 24, 2023, just three weeks after the atrocities of October 7, 2023 and the subsequent war, Anwar led a large “Malaysia Stands with Palestine” rally with 16,000 strong participants (Strangio, 2023), with cries that what Israel is doing is the “height of barbarism” (Azmi, 2023). He followed up the rally with a speech in parliament that affirms Malaysia’s relationship with Hamas as “freedom fighters” despite pressure from the United States (Chen, 2023). This is not new as back in 2006, Anwar clarified his position on Hamas: *“Do I agree with the position of Hamas on many issues, particularly the ambitions stated in their charter? Of course, I do not. But I have to respect their rights since they have been democratically elected, and I believe that engaging with them and persuading them to moderate their stance — particularly in*

reviewing their charter — is a necessary step. We cannot completely marginalize them by ignoring their position, harassing them, and placing impossible conditions on them... It is necessary to engage with Hamas, to persuade them to review their charter, but also to persuade Israel to view their engagement with the Palestinians not in a unilateral manner, but with the proper respect for the lives of the Palestinians,” (Pew Research Center, 2006: para. 10-11)

His administration has even taken the initiative to reverse previous cabinet decisions by barring Israeli ships from docking in Malaysia. This began with the ban on the Israeli shipping company ZIM from entering any Malaysian port, starting in December 2023 (Hakim, 2023). Anwar stated that ships flying the Israeli flag or en route to Israel are also prohibited from docking or loading cargo at Malaysian ports. As part of his populist messaging, Anwar drew attention to the fact that vessels from the Israeli shipping line ZIM had been allowed to enter Malaysian ports since 2005. By doing so, he sought to distinguish himself from earlier Barisan Nasional leaders and to project a stronger moral alignment with the Palestinian struggle. This is in line with his civilisational populist narrative of being with the people unlike the “elites” of former administrations.

Despite Anwar's efforts, his administration faced challenges in May 2024 due to a controversy involving BlackRock, a global investment fund renowned for its involvement in the Israeli economy and defence. While Anwar is steadfast in his diatribe against Israel, his administration oversaw the minority takeover of Malaysia Airports Holding (MAHB) by Global Infrastructure Partners (GIP), a company that was acquired by BlackRock. Opposition leaders in the country used this opportunity to question Anwar's commitment to Palestine (Muiz, 2024). Another example includes allowing US defence companies accused of complicity in Israeli war crimes to participate in Defence Services Asia and National Security Asia trade fairs in Kuala Lumpur, (Hassan, 2024). This series of events fed the narrative pushed by opposition leaders that Anwar's civilisational populist image might mask a less genuine commitment to Palestinian support.

Anwar's support for Palestine was further invigorated after the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyah on July 31, 2024. Another pro-Palestine rally was conducted by the government. About 20,000 people participated in the rally, showing massive support for Palestinians and the government's support for Palestine. During the rally, Anwar mentioned his

outreach to other Muslim leaders, including Egypt's Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Bahrain's Sheikh Hamad Isa Al Khalifa, and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman. He also thanked Qatar and Iran for their arrangement to honour Ismail Haniyeh after the assassination (Krishnan, 2024).

After months of outward support for Palestine, Anwar faced pushback from Malaysians. On August 16, 2024, two Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) aircraft transported 40 injured Palestinians and 80 relatives from Egypt to Malaysia to receive medical treatment (Malay Mail, 2024). In response, some Malaysians questioned the government's unnecessary commitment to Palestinians, pointing out that there were Malaysians in the country who could also benefit from medical treatment (Azizan, 2022). Former politicians have also questioned Malaysia's commitment to help rebuild Gaza when there are Malaysians who require immediate assistance. In response, Anwar said that domestic issues will always be there (Jamie, 2025). Here we see Anwar's civilisational populist strategy to prioritize the Muslim Ummah in order to convince the Muslim conservatives at home that he is with "the people" against Israel. This strong show of solidarity with Palestine highlighted a potential flaw in civilisational populism. Such populist foreign policy initiatives ultimately depend on sustained public support. Without broad domestic buy-in, they risk being perceived as performative or detached from the everyday concerns of Malaysians.

Anwar was further faced with more backlash when he answered "Yes" during an interview with CNN to questions on Israel's right to exist and to defend itself. Malaysians expressed anger on social media towards Anwar's acknowledgement of Israel. Critics, including political opposition, argue Anwar contradicted the government's policy of not recognising Israel and recalled his past controversial statements supporting efforts to protect Israel's security (MalaysiaNow, 2024). This reflects the paradox of a leader striving to appear balanced and statesmanlike while facing a public that overwhelmingly supports Palestine. Anwar's stance reveals how civilisational populism can serve as both reflection and performance. He channels the people's demand for a firmer, more confrontational posture toward Israel, even as his own diplomatic instincts incline toward moderation and dialogue.

Additionally, Malaysia has taken decisive steps to reaffirm its commitment to the Palestinian cause through substantial financial contributions and foreign policy adjustments. According to Solhi (2025), Malaysia allocated RM10 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency

for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 2023, along with an additional pledge of US\$200,000 (RM894,000) annually from 2021 to 2025 to the same organisation. In 2024, the government donated another US\$5 million to Palestinians through the Jordan government and US\$1 million to UNRWA, making it a total US\$5.2 million since November 2023 on top of the annual contribution.

Unlike the more moderate stance that Anwar used to take as deputy prime minister in the 1990s, he resembles Mahathir in trying to become an international Islamic leader within a civilisational populist framework.

Relationship with Other Leaders

Anwar has faced criticism from his domestic critics for spending more time abroad than at home since taking office. In his defence, Anwar claimed he has been working very hard to bring in investment to Malaysia as part of his economic plan for the country (Malay Mail, 2025). Soon after the beginning of Israel's attack on Gaza, Anwar went to Riyadh for a planned meeting between ASEAN and the GCC. But during the meeting, Palestine's issue took centre stage, and the leaders stressed the importance of peace and stability in Palestine (Nugali, 2023). This cooperation was in stark contrast to Anwar's first visit to Saudi Arabia as prime minister in March 2023 when he "failed" to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and King Salman. As argued by Musa (2023), a Malay leader gains widespread legitimacy if they are warmly welcomed in Saudi Arabia, especially if they are invited to enter the Kaaba. Anwar's failure to meet these expectations in early 2023 created the impression that people might not view him as an ally. As a known Islamist, Anwar might be perceived as critical of Saudi Arabia's more conservative form of governance. However, the Gaza War has provided him with an opportunity to reaffirm and strengthen Malaysia's commitment to working with Saudi Arabia.

Anwar also has a well-documented close relationship with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Anwar received a phone call from Erdogan on live television before his first press conference as prime minister (Nabila, 2022). It can be argued that Anwar put the phone call on speaker on live television to gain further legitimacy as a Muslim leader who is supported by another civilisational populist leader who also happens to be revered in Malaysia. Therefore, it was not unexpected that both leaders discussed the issue of Palestine during their meeting in Istanbul in October 2023 (*Daily Sabah*, 2023). When Erdogan was invited to Malaysia in 2025,

Anwar noted, *“While others have hesitated, he [Erdogan] has remained resolute. As global attention has intensified, he has ensured that support for Palestine translates into meaningful action,”* (Iskandar & Sallehuddin, 2025). This close bond between the two can easily be expressed as a desire to carve out Muslim leadership vis-à-vis the West’s perceived indifference within a civilisational discourse tied to the Palestinian conflict.

Unsurprisingly, Anwar maintains a close relationship with the late Ismail Haniyeh. Following the outbreak of the war, Anwar made a phone call to Ismail Haniyeh in October 2022 to reiterate Malaysia’s continued support for the people in Gaza (Hilmy, 2023). When Anwar visited Qatar, he also met with Haniyeh, who briefed him on the on-ground situation in Gaza (CNA, 2024). It was the first time Anwar met Haniyeh since becoming prime minister, although they have met twice before. Similar to the previous case with Erdogan, the meeting with Haniyeh is also to embolden Anwar’s position as an Islamic civilisational populist leader dedicated to the Palestinian issue, especially in supporting Hamas in Gaza. This is not unique to Anwar; Prime Minister Najib Razak was the first Malaysian leader to visit Gaza in a show of support for Hamas (Salem, 2013), despite Western condemnation of Hamas as a terrorist organisation.

All these actions demonstrate Malaysia’s determination to resist Western pressure as the civilisational “others.” Anwar, just as Najib, wanted to prove to the conservative Muslim population in Malaysia that they are politically on the side of Islamists, therefore making them no different from the opposition PAS. But in Anwar’s meeting with Haniyeh, he tried a more conciliatory tone when he said, *“Our approach is to be in contact with the political body of Hamas and not get involved in any military activities,”* (Bernama, 2024). As discussed earlier, it reflects Anwar’s desire to be a champion of the Muslim cause without abandoning the good rapport he has established with “the West” since his days in Mahathir’s administration.

Analysis: Projecting Muslim Leadership through Civilisational Populism

Anwar’s civilisational populism is meant to portray him as a defender and leader of Muslims in the face of opposition and accusations that he is a “liberal” and that his government has “threatened” the official position of Islam and the special rights of the Malays in Malaysia. Since more conservative Muslims are prone to support the Islamist-conservative Perikatan Nasional coalition, Anwar needs to focus on the Palestinian issue to show his commitment to

the Islamic civilisational narrative as an important Muslim leader. Nevertheless, Anwar has not been as vocal on other Muslim issues, such as the plight of the Uyghurs. We argue that his foreign policy is driven more by Islamic civilisational populism than by a universal concern for Muslim suffering. Palestine, home to Islam's third holiest mosque, holds a special place in the hearts of Malaysian Muslims despite its geographical distance. By contrast, Anwar has been notably cautious regarding the Uyghur issue, given China's status as one of Malaysia's most important trading partners and a key source of investment (Hew, 2024). Openly confronting Beijing could jeopardize economic relations, making it politically expedient for Anwar to channel his moral and civilisational rhetoric toward Gaza instead. This further underscores the selective and populist dimensions of his foreign policy stance.

Anwar, like other Muslim populists in Malaysia, has often used alleged ties to Israel as a political weapon against his opponents. Even while in the opposition, he accused then-Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's administration of being backed by "the Jewish lobby in the US and some parties inside Israel," (Aziz, 2008) a classic trope of civilisational populism that frames rivals as aligned with an adversarial "other." After Najib Razak succeeded Abdullah, Anwar continued this line of attack, claiming that Najib's "1Malaysia" campaign was modelled after Israel's "One Israel" coalition in 1999, for which he was suspended from parliament in 2010 (BBC, 2010). In retaliation, Najib's government accused Anwar of hypocrisy, citing his ties to Paul Wolfowitz, a pro-Israel American neoconservative, as well as his associations with the Brookings Institution and the National Endowment for Democracy—both viewed by critics as pro-Israel organisations (Malhi, 2010). This exchange highlights how civilisational populism in Malaysia operates symmetrically across political divides with Israel becoming a convenient symbolic foil through which rival leaders contest moral legitimacy and Islamic authenticity.

After years of complicated rhetoric by Anwar on Israel and Palestine, will his recent commitment to Palestine and Gaza work to sway the Malay voters he so coveted? Based on the polarised environment in Malaysian politics, the impact might be marginal (Gimino, 2025). Whatever Anwar does for Palestine is likely to be dismissed as performative. Worse still, the conservative Islamist opposition will highlight missteps—such as the BlackRock controversy discussed earlier—as evidence of his lack of genuine commitment. They will also portray his efforts to maintain strong ties with the United States as proof that he is a "lackey" of the West.

This is problematic for Anwar, who has long been labeled a “chameleon” and “all things to all men” because of his perceived opportunism and inconsistencies throughout his decades in politics (Allers, 2014: 236).

Globally, Muslim leaders find the Palestinian cause to be a hidden blessing. It is the one thing that leaders from Indonesia to Morocco can unite around. In fact, it gives Anwar an opportunity to round out Muslim leaders of all governance styles after having criticised Muslim governments in the past for using totalitarian means to stay in power (Allers, 2014: 232). If Malaysia faced the scorn of Saudi Arabia for holding the Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2019 that appeared to challenge the OIC and the closing of the Saudi-backed King Salman Centre for International Peace (KSCIP) in Kuala Lumpur in 2018, it appears the relationship may have thawed. While the KL Summit (which saw leaders from Iran, Qatar, and Turkey convene in Malaysia) and the signing of the Abraham Accord by some MENA countries may have led to intra-civilisational rivalry, the war in Gaza appears to have cut across political leanings. When President Trump suggested the US “take over” Gaza and relocate Palestinians to Egypt or Jordan, Arab leaders announced a trust fund for Gaza's reconstruction and urged international support. The OIC endorsed the Arab League's counterproposal to Trump's plan during an emergency meeting in Jeddah in March 2025 (AFP, 2025). Similarly, when Israel conducted a strike in Doha, Qatar, Muslim governments quickly voiced collective condemnation and rallied to defend Qatari sovereignty (Reuters, 2025). This illustrates a concerted effort to address the crisis through a united Islamic civilisational front.

Conclusion

This article discusses how Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's tenth prime minister and a known Islamist, leverages civilisational populism as a strategy to solidify his legitimacy within Malaysia. This strategic alignment allows Anwar to connect with broader cultural and religious narratives, thus attempting to resonate with the identities of his Muslim constituents. For example, after Israel intercepted the Global *Sumud* Flotilla, Anwar's swift condemnation and successful effort to secure the return of Malaysian activists drew widespread praise at home, flooding social media with messages of support (Bernama, 2025). When he later organised another rally in October 2025, thousands of Malaysians gathered once again (The Star, 2025), demonstrating strong public backing for his civilisational populist foreign policy and reinforcing his image as both a moral and political leader of the Muslim world. However, this article suggests that the effectiveness of such a strategy is debatable. While it may strengthen

Anwar's appeal among certain demographics, it might alienate other groups who do not share the same cultural or religious perspectives.

Civilisational populism involves the articulation of political narratives that appeal to shared cultural and religious identities beyond a nation. Leaders employing this strategy often position their societies within a broader civilisational context, sometimes framing them in opposition to other cultural or civilisational blocs. Anwar's rhetoric is not isolated in its national context; rather, it fits within a global pattern where Muslim leaders use similar strategies to connect their political agendas to a civilisational identity. This narrative is particularly focused on the perceived dichotomy and interactions between the Muslim world and "the West."

Anwar Ibrahim's response to the Gaza genocide aligns him with figures such as Turkey's Erdogan, who is also known to employ civilisational populism (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023b). Like Erdogan, who consistently frames the Palestinian cause as a moral and religious struggle between the oppressed Muslim *ummah* and a hypocritical Western order, Anwar situates Malaysia's pro-Palestine stance within a larger narrative of Islamic solidarity and civilisational justice. Both leaders employ emotionally charged language invoking dignity, oppression, and Western double standards, positioning themselves as moral defenders of the Muslim world.

In contrast, in Indonesia, Presidents Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto's responses have been more restrained and diplomatic, reflecting Indonesia's pluralist and non-aligned tradition (Hasram & Surana, 2025). Anwar's rhetoric goes further by mobilising both domestic and transnational Muslim sentiment, reinforcing his identity as a global Muslim statesman. This approach underscores how Anwar's civilisational populism merges Islamic moral discourse with national legitimacy, situating Malaysia within the moral geography of the *ummah* while asserting its independence from Western power.

The significance of civilisational populism in today's political environment cannot be overstated. It provides leaders with a powerful tool to mobilise support by drawing on deep-seated cultural identities and historical narratives. This approach can foster unity and cohesion among a leader's base but can also exacerbate divisions within societies and on a global scale depending on the sociopolitical context.

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