

Emanuela Mangiarotti

University of Pavia
emanuela.mangiarotti@unipv.it

Nur Rafeeda Daut

University of Nottingham Malaysia
Rafeeda.Daut@nottingham.edu.my

Malaysia's assumption of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) chairmanship in 2025 occurred amid growing domestic pressures on Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to deliver long-promised reforms. This article examines how the chairmanship functioned simultaneously as an instrument for accumulating political capital and as a magnifier of political tensions. It argues that the government strategically framed ASEAN leadership through the Madani framework to project moral authority, diplomatic competence and economic opportunity, attempting to reinforce legitimacy in a context of coalition fragility, corruption controversies and rising socio-economic discontent.

The study analyses how high-profile diplomatic engagements, mediation initiatives and humanitarian advocacy were mobilized to enhance government credibility. At the same time, domestic contestation over rising living costs, the controversial Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART) with the United States, corruption cases linked to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and subnational electoral dynamics exposed limits to the chairmanship's legitimizing effects while leading to a depletion of political capital.

Ultimately, the chairmanship illustrates the reciprocal relationship between domestic governance challenges and foreign policy activism in a middle-power context.

KEYWORDS – Malaysia; Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); Madani framework; political capital

1. *Introduction*

In 2025, Malaysia assumed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) chairmanship at a moment of growing strain for the Anwar Ibrahim administration, under pressure to deliver on promised reforms. The reformist agenda of the main governing coalition Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) has encountered structural and political obstacles, ranging from elite fragmentation to the persistence of informal power networks and identity-based mobilization [Mangiarotti & Razali 2025]. By 2025, key reform promises, particularly those touching issues of institutional accountability and socio-economic welfare, remained only partially fulfilled [Weiss 2025].

Political pressures were heightened by the need to manage a heterogeneous coalition, navigate contentious areas of policy intervention and respond to public expectations for social and economic progress. In particular, the long wave of corruption scandals involving prominent political elites, resumed centre stage in public debate, offering the opposition and public opinion new grounds to scrutinize the government. Regional electoral dynamics, notably the Sabah state elections, added further complexity. On the one hand, the campaign reignited deep-seated aspirations for regional autonomy, highlighting the federal government's failure to address the socio-economic disparities and political marginalization faced by insular states compared to those of Peninsular Malaysia.¹ On the other hand, the electoral results pointed to shifting allegiance. In particular, the erosion of support among Chinese voters for the PH coalition had immediate repercussions for the stability of the unity government. Parties that suffered significant electoral loss, like the Democratic Action Party (DAP), began pressing Prime Minister Anwar on policies aimed at regaining Chinese voter

¹ Malaysia consists of Peninsular Malaysia as well as the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, which joined the federation in 1963. Over time, dissatisfaction has emerged in Sabah and Sarawak regarding economic disparities, particularly concerns that their natural resources have not been equitably distributed by the federal government based in Peninsular Malaysia.

support, placing additional strain on relations among the coalition's constituent parties.²

Within this context, Malaysia's turn as ASEAN Chair³ provided the government with an opportunity to build political capital. PM Anwar Ibrahim actively leveraged this role both externally, by articulating a vision for ASEAN as a regional and international player grounded in moral leadership, and domestically, framing the chairmanship as evidence of effective governance and emphasizing its potential to generate new political and economic opportunities for the country.

This article explores the interplay among internal governance challenges, societal expectations and the strategic use of ASEAN leadership to reinforce legitimacy and influence public discourse.

The analytical focus of the article is twofold. First, it investigates how Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship both shaped and was shaped by domestic politics. Second, it explores the intersections among domestic political imperatives, foreign policy and economic considerations, showing how the chairmanship functioned simultaneously as a platform for accumulating political capital and as a magnifier of underlying political and societal pressures.

2. Political capital and the ASEAN chairmanship under Madani framework

Throughout 2025, the Anwar administration systematically leveraged Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship as a source of domestic political capital. Political capital can be understood as the accumulated legitimacy, credibility and influence that political actors can mobilize to advance policy objectives and shape political outcomes. This capacity depends on the level of public support they enjoy, the range of policy instruments and resources at their disposal and their ability to deploy these effectively [French 2011].

The Anwar government framed high-profile summits, ministerial meetings and diplomatic initiatives as evidence of competence and leadership credibility in domestic affairs, especially leveraging the Madani framework as a guiding principle of Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship. At the outset of his mandate in 2023, Anwar Ibrahim launched the Malaysia Madani slogan, projecting a strong moral foundation to political leadership

² Pakatan Harapan's electoral base is largely drawn from non-Malay voters, particularly the Chinese community, making their support crucial to the coalition's parliamentary strength. Since taking power, Pakatan Harapan has explicitly framed itself as pursuing a more inclusive Malaysia and reducing ethnic barriers.

³ The Chairmanship of ASEAN rotates annually based on the alphabetical order of the English names of Member States [ASEAN n.d.].

through a narrative of good governance, progress and common humanity, rooted in Islamic values [Mangiarotti 2024].

Evoking this approach, the PM characterized Malaysia's ASEAN leadership as guided by «wisdom, reason and a shared sense of purpose under the banner of unity and peace» [*The Star* 2025, 29 December]. Official messaging consistently touted the transposition of the Madani framework to the regional level, stressing Malaysia's convening power, its ability to articulate consensus within a fragmented regional environment and its normative leadership on selected humanitarian and political issues [*Bernama* 2024, 6 June; 2025, 25 April]. In a Facebook post late in the year, Anwar said that «this chairmanship has elevated Malaysia as a trusted partner in efforts to uphold peace, stability and hope in the region. May it endure, Insya-Allah» [*The Star* 2025, 29 December]. Within this framework, the PM emerged as a peacemaker, regional statesman and mediator [Beng & Hamzah 2025]. Highlighting the benefits this balanced approach would bring to Malaysia, Anwar affirmed that «when we maintain good relations with other countries, traders, tourists and investors come here — and that benefits the rakyat»⁴ [Iskandar et al. 2025]. This statement conveyed both an attempt to respond to mounting criticism over a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership deal signed with the US on the sidelines of the October ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur and to shift the focus away from the unresolved reform agenda and coalition fragility that continued to pose persistent challenges to domestic governance.

Public reception of Malaysia's ASEAN role, however, was uneven. For many, ASEAN leadership appeared distant from everyday concerns related to rising living costs, employment insecurity and governance accountability. The leadership's strong moral dimension became a further constraint, in the context of perceived contradictions in policy and institutional practices and increasing polarization around identity and socio-economic issues.

2.1. *Domestic contestation over policy priorities*

Throughout 2025, public demonstrations, including calls for Anwar's resignation, illustrated the persistence of political polarization and the capacity of opposition actors to contest the executive's authority, despite Malaysia's heightened international visibility.

Critics questioned the extent to which the prime minister's emphasis on international engagement diverted attention and resources from unfulfilled domestic reform commitments. Opposition parties championed

⁴ Rakyat is a Malay term meaning «the people of Malaysia», but only in context; as a Malay term, it actually just means 'the people'.

this narrative to undermine the unity government's credibility in the eyes of the discontented sections of the electorate, especially mobilizing socio-economic issues. In July, as public frustration over rising living costs became increasingly visible, Anwar announced the implementation of ad hoc measures, including a cash handout of RM100 [€ 20] to all adult citizens and a cut to fuel prices [*Al Jazeera* 2025, 26 July]. The measures, however, did not dissuade thousands of people, mostly Malays, from taking to the streets on 26 July to demand Anwar's resignation. Under the leadership of the opposition party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS) and Malay-rights groups, and with the support of major political figures such as former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, protesters criticized Anwar government's tax measures for disproportionately affecting lower-income Malays and for failing more broadly to deliver on its electoral promises [*Channel News Asia* 2025, 25 July].

In critiquing the administration's self-celebrative tone on achievements as ASEAN Chair, PAS linked economic issues to broader concerns around the preservation of national sovereignty. The party expressed strong criticism of Anwar's engagement with US President Donald Trump and the signing of the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART). PAS framed the issue as «not only an economic dispute but a civilisational one» [Shukri 2025]. In a Facebook post, PAS information chief Fadhli Shaari commented that «the agreement was not a victory to celebrate» adding that «it is, instead, a handover of Malaysia's policies, resources and regulatory power to Washington» [*Focus Malaysia* 2025]. Shaari's critique reflected widespread displeasure among opposition figures who framed the agreement as a new form of colonialism promoted under the guise of economic cooperation. Invoking fears of external control over domestic policy, some political opponents likened ART to the Malayan Union or the Pangkor Treaty of 1874⁵ under British colonial rule.

Analysts highlighted the dozens of clauses that stipulate «Malaysia shall» undertake obligations, while far fewer impose binding commitments on the United States [Nixon 2025]. Detractors also raised the issue of sovereignty, particularly regarding provisions that require Malaysia to align trade restrictions with US measures taken against third countries for economic or national-security reasons [Hafiz Hassan 2025].

Debates also expressed worries about how expanded market access for US corporations could affect elite-owned businesses in Malaysia [Hunter

⁵ The reference is to an agreement between Great Britain and Sultan of Perak in 1874, which established a British residence system and thus sanctioned British control over the Sultanate's administration, paving the way for the expansion of British colonial rule in Malaya.

2025]. Many argued that ART was negotiated with limited parliamentary or stakeholder scrutiny [Nixon 2025]. In its effort to appease public outcry, the Anwar government stated that ART had averted major tariffs being imposed on Malaysia by the Trump administration [Yusof 2025]. Moreover, the deal had not yet entered into force, as it was pending domestic ratification and clause-by-clause review [*The Vibes* 2026, 5 February].

These critiques intersected with debates over Anwar's political persona, particularly the tension between his reformist rhetoric and pragmatic accommodation of entrenched interests. Controversies surrounding internal party dynamics, including the election of Nurul Izzah Anwar, his daughter, as deputy president of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR),⁶ reinforced perceptions of elite consolidation and dynastic tendencies [Tan 2025].

These polemics intensified as both old and newly emerging cases of corruption involving key political figures belonging to parties within the unity government took centre stage in public debate. In December, former Prime Minister (2009–2018) and UMNO president (2008–2018) Najib Razak was found guilty of abuse of power and criminal breach of trust and sentenced to an additional 15 years in prison in connection to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) investment fund scandal. Najib had already been convicted of graft and money laundering but, in 2024, a Pardons Board chaired by Malaysia's king halved his sentence at the request of PM Anwar [Mangiarotti & Razali 2025, 239]. Within this context, anti-corruption activists renewed calls for reforms to ensure accountability of political elites and a more transparent institutional functioning [Tang 2025].

Electoral dynamics added another layer of complexity. The Sabah state election, held in November, became a focal point for debates about local disenchantment with the federal government. Long-standing demands for greater autonomy, combined with dissatisfaction over federal resource allocation, dominated the electoral campaign under the banner of the «Sabah first» slogan, championed by local political parties [Chai 2025]. Anwar responded to this sentiment by invoking unity and social harmony as key assets for Malaysia's international standing and attractiveness, stating that «the world looks at us for investment because this country is peaceful. Remember, not many countries have all races, Malay, Chinese, Iban, Kadazan, Murut, Dayak, Bugis, Indian, who can sit together peacefully like this.» [*New Strait Times* 2025, 16 November].

Yet election results proved disappointing for Anwar's Pakatan Harapan (PH), the main ruling coalition within the federal unity government, which includes the Chinese-majority Democratic Action Party (DAP). Specifically,

⁶ Anwar Ibrahim is PKR's president.

voting outcomes provided some indications of shifting political allegiances among electoral blocs previously considered solid, which analysts have interpreted as a response to growing dissatisfaction with federal-level political trajectories. While the locally based Sabah People's Alliance (GRS) was confirmed as the leading coalition in the state [Puyok 2025], the DAP experienced a decisive decline in voters' support in Chinese-dominated urban constituencies, losing all eight seats it contested [Mahmud & Norman 2025]. The party's poor performance revealed the political cost of its longstanding alliance with PH at the federal level, amid the corruption scandals tainting the unity government and a perceived failure to address key demands for redistribution and recognition that animate the state's political debate [Chai 2025]. The outcome prompted the DAP to pressure the Anwar administration to implement reforms, issuing a six-month ultimatum before «reassessing its role in government» [Bedi 2025]. Among the demands, the party included the recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) for entry into public universities and the civil service awarded by independent Chinese medium schools, confirming the extent to which community-based educational policies continue to mobilize contentious issues of citizenship, economic opportunity and equity [Shukri 2026].

The Sabah elections thus represented a critical moment in which there have emerged new political configurations that are likely to shape momentum ahead of the next general elections, due by early 2028. At the same time, the outcomes underscored the limited traction that ASEAN leadership exerted over local grievances. While Anwar's appeals to unity and harmony sought to leverage Malaysia's multicultural composition as a signal of stability and a tool for attracting global investment, these gestures fell short of mediating voter concerns about resource allocation and recognition of community-based demands.

2.2. Fault lines in the humanitarian agenda

Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship also intersected with a range of domestic sensitivities related to humanitarian and refugee issues. Discussions held during ASEAN meetings on Myanmar's political crisis and the situation in Gaza resonated strongly within Malaysia's domestic political sphere, where humanitarian concerns are deeply entangled with identity and distributive politics.

The government's vocal stance on Gaza in particular generated support and controversy. While historically Malaysia has been supportive of Palestinian independence and critical of Israel's colonial policies, Anwar has emphasized this stance through a strong condemnation of Israel [Musa 2024]. Images of him addressing pro-Palestinian rallies made the headlines

throughout 2025. The government openly supported Malaysia's participation in the Global Sumud Flotilla (GSF), the group of international vessels that attempted to break Israel's Gaza blockade in September 2025. Anwar backed public protests at Israel's abduction of GSF delegates and publicly praised them upon their return [*Borneo Post* 2025, 5 October]. Malaysia coordinated humanitarian assistance via Wisma Putra's Ops Ihsan, working closely with Malaysian NGOs and regional partners to deliver food, medical supplies, and emergency relief to Gaza [*The Star* 2025, 6 November; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia 2025]. Malaysia also welcomed and supported international calls for the full resumption of humanitarian aid, condemning the use of aid as a weapon of war [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia 2025].

Official expressions of solidarity with Palestinians aligned with popular sentiment, especially among segments of the Muslim majority. According to Shukri and Hassan, these discursive positionings should be read through the framework of civilizational populism, «a political ideology that [...] involves a discourse that portrays a particular civilisation—often religious or cultural—as superior and under threat from outsiders or other civilisations» [Shukri & Hassan 2025, 2]. As the authors suggest, since the start of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza in October 2023, support for Palestine has been framed as the moral responsibility of Malaysia as representative of, and in relation to, the Muslim world, in line with the government's Madani framework [Mangiarotti & Razali 2025]. Anwar's use of «moral and civilizational narratives» in his stance over Gaza was instrumental «to assert Malaysia's autonomy on the world stage while reinforcing his domestic image as a defender of Islamic and national identity» [Mangiarotti & Razali 2025, 10]. This aspect assumes particular significance in a domestic political arena in which allegiance to identity claims continues to weigh on political legitimacy [Mangiarotti 2024]. In this context, affirming the primacy of Islam as the core moral reference to the government's political action has become key to maintaining credibility and countering accusations of betraying the national core coming from some sections of the opposition, including PAS. In this domain, as argued by Amrita Malhi, PAS holds the «narrative advantage» as the ultimate embodiment and representative of Malay-Muslim suprematism, within the spectrum of party politics [Malhi 2025]. In this respect, Anwar has anchored both domestic and foreign policy to a political narrative that allows him to walk a tightrope between the image of a strong Muslim leader and the multiple identity outlooks represented within a disparate government coalition comprising the DAP and regional coalitions such as the Sarawak Parties Alliance (GPS) and the Sabah People's Alliance (GRS).

The move, however, also exposed the Anwar administration to criticism, highlighting a fundamental disconnect between discourse and

policy decisions. The controversial ART deal was once again mobilized by the opposition to condemn Anwar's support for Palestine as hypocritical, given the efforts to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with the United States, Israel's closest ally [Shukri 2025]. In a similar vein, critics have seized on the controversy over the involvement of a BlackRock-linked firm in the Malaysia Airports privatization to argue that the Anwar government's actions contradict its proclaimed support for the Palestinian cause. BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, holds substantial investments in Israeli companies and in firms accused of enabling and supporting the genocide in Palestine. Some political figures have claimed that permitting such ties undermines Malaysia's moral stance and aligns the administration too closely with interests perceived as sympathetic to Israel [*South China Morning Post* 2024, 24 May].⁷

Similarly, discussions around refugee protection and humanitarian responsibility revealed a gap between Malaysia's regional rhetoric as ASEAN Chair and its domestic policy constraints. On the one hand, civil society groups called on Malaysia to use its chairmanship to push for more principled regional approaches to the Myanmar and Rohingya crisis, including enhanced protection frameworks and engagement with displaced communities. On the other hand, Malaysia's long-standing legal and policy limitations on formal refugee recognition and protection have left many Rohingya refugees in precarious conditions [*Justice for Myanmar* 2025; Lee 2025].

3. ASEAN Chairmanship: Conflict, Mediation and President Trump

Malaysia's role as ASEAN Chair inevitably became the central pillar of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's foreign policy agenda for the year. The Madani government adopted the theme «Inclusivity and Sustainability» for ASEAN's 2025 chairmanship to signal its commitment to ensuring that regional development benefits all ASEAN member states and communities [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia 2024]. The concept of ASEAN centrality underscores the organization's role as the central convening

⁷ In response to the backlash over the involvement of a BlackRock-linked firm in the Malaysia Airports privatisation, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his administration defended the decision by urging critics not to politicise the issue and stressing that it was «not realistic» to sever ties with every company perceived to have links to Israel, arguing that doing so would harm the national economy while maintaining that Malaysia remains firm in its support for the Palestinian cause [*The Strait Times* 2025, 28 June].

platform of regional cooperation through norm-setting, consensus-building, consultation and the avoidance of confrontation⁸ [Caballero-Anthony 2014].

A major highlight of the ASEAN Summit was the invitation and visit of President Donald Trump to Malaysia. Despite the backlash surrounding Trump's invitation due to Palestinian issues and tariffs imposed by the US on ASEAN member states, Anwar defended the decision as an essential component of diplomatic engagement, arguing that it provided him a direct platform to raise concerns over the Gaza conflict and other pressing regional and global issues with the US President [*South China Morning Post* 2025, 2 October]. Some analysts viewed the invitation as simply the «ASEAN Way» of diplomacy which focuses on the principles of neutrality, non-interference and consultation while maintaining ASEAN's centrality [Heiduk and Hell, 2025].

Malaysia's and ASEAN's major concerns have always been to avoid being trapped in major powers rivalry. ASEAN members continue to hedge [Gerstl 2024], engaging both Washington and Beijing, and even participating in both US and China-led naval exercises, underscoring their determination to avoid choosing sides [Hutt 2023]. However, the US–China rivalry has increasingly turned into a zero-sum game where major powers are pressuring ASEAN states to «choose sides». With member states like Laos and Cambodia highly aligned with China due to economic interests, and the Philippines towards the US for security reasons, ASEAN members are being pulled in different directions.

Trump's visit proved that the US was determined to use trade deals to counter China in the region. In that respect, political analysts, economists and academics have questioned the reasons behind the Madani government urgency in signing the ART agreement as other ASEAN member states are currently negotiating with the US. In that sense, the pursuit of unequal bilateral deals could have potential detrimental effects on efforts to advance collective responses among ASEAN countries [Armstrong 2025].

Thus, Malaysia's attempt to balance major powers and leverage neutrality for domestic and international political gain has yielded limited success. It has in turn contributed to challenging ASEAN centrality in the region particularly due to the failure in unifying ASEAN members on the Thailand-Cambodia conflict and the Myanmar conflict.

⁸ According to Caballero-Anthony in classical realist terms, ASEAN is weak due to large disparities in military and economic capabilities among members. However, it influences the region through how it organizes relationships, shapes behavior, and structures regional interaction.

3.1. *The Thailand–Cambodia conflict*

The Thailand-Cambodia conflict presented Malaysia with a chance to enhance its international visibility by offering itself in a mediating role. As the chair of ASEAN, Malaysia played a leading position by installing several efforts to avoid the conflict from escalating with the goal of a ceasefire and peaceful resolution.

This long-standing, unresolved border dispute escalated into significant military clashes in 2025.

Discussions took an unexpected turn during the ASEAN Summit with President Trump's arrival and intervention. President Trump overshadowed Malaysia and ASEAN's efforts in resolving the conflict when he was seen as taking credit for «mediating» the dispute [*Politico* 2025, 6 October]. He termed the deal as «the Kuala Lumpur peace accords», called it «historic» and congratulated Anwar for the successful outcome, which saw the signing of the Joint Declaration between the two sides. Trump later praised Thai and Cambodian leaders for «acting like best friends» at the signing of the declaration.

Trump overlooked the fact that Thailand and Cambodia have not agreed on how to define the border, which currently seems impossible with rising nationalistic sentiment on both sides. Anwar's effort in playing a leading role during the peace talks backfired when Thai nationalist groups and some Thai-language newspapers accused him of interfering in Thai sovereignty, overstepping his role as ASEAN Chair and not respecting ASEAN's principle of non-intervention. These accusations led to protests outside the Malaysian Embassy in Bangkok [*Bangkok Post* 2025, 22 November].

3.2. *The Myanmar conflict*

The Myanmar conflict has presented a new, demanding challenge for ASEAN. While the grave human rights aspect concerns all ASEAN members, Malaysia is particularly concerned about the influx of Rohingya refugees.

Through the Chairmanship, Malaysia adopted assertive positions on Myanmar. It consistently condemned the continued violence against civilians and insisted that the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus (5PC)⁹ be used as the

⁹ The 5PC calls for (1) an immediate cessation of violence, (2) constructive dialogue among all parties, (3) mediation by an ASEAN Special Envoy, (4) humanitarian assistance through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), and (5) envoy access to all stakeholders [ASEAN Secretariat 2021].

primary framework for conflict resolution [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia 2023]. Anwar has repeatedly emphasized that ASEAN has a moral responsibility to act when a member state violates the spirit of the ASEAN Charter, arguing that inaction would undermine ASEAN's legitimacy [Walker 2025].

In contrast with the usual ASEAN practice of non-interference, Malaysia stressed the importance of inclusivity and supported dialogue with all relevant conflict stakeholders, including Myanmar's opposition National Unity Government. This controversial stance by Malaysia reflected its belief that the crisis could not be resolved through engagement with the military authorities alone [Povera 2022].

In addition to the 5PC and seizing the opportunity to play a leading role in brokering peace, Malaysia also appointed its former senior diplomat Tan Sri Othman Hashim as ASEAN Chair's Special Envoy on Myanmar. His mandate is to widen consultations in search for solutions for the situation [ASEAN Secretariat 2025a]. Malaysia also supported ASEAN's continued decision to bar Myanmar's junta leaders from high-level association meetings until tangible progress has been made [ASEAN Secretariat 2025a].

Due to the recent earthquakes in Myanmar, ASEAN's efforts have also focused on the humanitarian assistance. ASEAN delivered aid, conducted needs assessments, and coordinated large-scale relief operations [ASEAN Secretariat 2025; *New Straits Times*, 2025, 31 March]. While humanitarian action would not resolve the political conflict, it has allowed ASEAN to maintain engagement with military authorities.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's push for a stronger regional action against the junta has been unsuccessful [Choong 2025].¹⁰ For instance, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam resisted its call to reevaluate ASEAN's non-interference. China's involvement in the conflict,¹¹ currently acting as a broker, has further diminished Malaysia's role as a mediator and its centrality in regional diplomacy.

3.3. *Genocide in Gaza*

Malaysia's Chairmanship coincided with the prolonged humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, enabling the country to project moral leadership beyond

¹⁰ ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus has yielded limited results, and the junta has failed to comply, limiting Malaysia's effectiveness.

¹¹ Beijing, acting as a broker, facilitated dialogues and structured a 5-part roadmap which includes a special envoy visits and hosting talks to prevent further fighting.

Southeast Asia while remaining anchored in ASEAN's consensus-based diplomacy.

Anwar used the chairmanship as an opportunity to further strengthen his political identity as a Muslim leader and Malaysia's position as a Muslim-majority nation. He described Gaza as a «test of shared humanity», arguing that silence in the face of mass civilian suffering would undermine international norms and moral credibility [Bernama 2025, 22 July]. In fact, within the context of the chairmanship, Anwar framed Gaza as a universal humanitarian and legal concern, integrating advocacy for Palestinian civilians into ASEAN deliberations and international forums [ASEAN Secretariat 2025b; *Malay Mail* 2025, 22 May].

Some analysts view Malaysia's Gaza diplomacy under Anwar as «principled leadership that places human dignity at the centre of foreign policy, even when doing so carries diplomatic costs» [Hassan 2025]. In that respect, Malaysia's stance on the issue has prompted a reflection on the role of a so-called middle power in international politics, especially illustrating a capacity to «inject moral clarity» into multilateral diplomacy [Kuik 2025].

4. Conclusion

Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN chairmanship shows how regional leadership can serve as both a resource and a drain for domestic political capital. By projecting the Madani framework onto ASEAN diplomacy, the Anwar administration sought to translate international visibility into space for political manoeuvre at home. This strategy enhanced Malaysia's global profile and reinforced the prime minister's image as a mediator and moral voice on humanitarian crises. However, the chairmanship's domestic dividends were uneven. Persistent concerns over living costs, corruption, coalition cohesion and inequalities limited public resonance, while controversies surrounding trade agreements and elite politics exposed contradictions between reformist rhetoric and pragmatic governance.

At the international level, initiatives on Myanmar, Gaza and the Thailand–Cambodia dispute showcased normative ambition but also revealed ASEAN's structural constraints and internal divisions. These challenges highlighted the fragility of consensus in an era of intensifying geopolitical rivalry.

The Malaysian case underscores that ASEAN chairmanships are politically fraught arenas shaped by domestic imperatives, societal expectations and regional pressures. The political capital generated through and used in foreign policy ultimately had to contend with government responses to structural inequalities, demands for institutional accountability

and the ability to reconcile competing identity and economic demands within Malaysia's plural society.

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