

Malaysia's Mahathir in a delicate balancing act

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Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has reacted cautiously to the political situation following the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. On the one hand, he has been keen not to alienate the Bush administration. On the other, he has attempted to shore up his shaky political position at home, particularly against the Islamic-based Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which has been making gains among the country's predominantly Muslim Malays, who constitute 60 percent of the population.

Mahathir condemned the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon and indicated that his government was prepared to cooperate in tracking down those responsible. Local media reports indicated a distinct nervousness in ruling circles over rumours that the US had named Malaysia as one of nine countries harbouring terrorists. Mahathir was quick to reassure the Bush administration that his government would extradite anyone who had committed crimes outside the country.

At the same time, the prime minister was careful to not to give unconditional backing to the US "war on terrorism". He urged the US not to attack Afghanistan unless it could provide clear evidence implicating Osama bin Laden in the September 11 attacks and wrote to British Prime Minister Tony Blair urging his support for a UN conference on terrorism.

Mahathir told a press conference: "We need to find the root cause of terrorism and look for effective ways of handling the problem. Otherwise it will be a never-ending sequence of 'I hit you, you hit me' and it will be the innocent people who will suffer the most." He had remarked earlier that "the problem in Palestine must be eradicated as well as that in Iraq and Chechnya. Only when there is no fresh oppression will the problem of terrorism be overcome."

The prime minister's comments were aimed at undercutting PAS and preventing anger over US war drive from being turned against his government. PAS, which calls for the formation of an Islamic state, made serious inroads into support for Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in the 1999 national elections and currently holds power in two northern states.

PAS has capitalised on widespread hostility to Mahathir's treatment of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked from office in 1998 following sharp disagreements within UMNO over the direction of economic policy. Anwar is currently in jail after being charged and convicted of trumped-up charges of sexual misconduct and corruption.

Mahathir's statements on the September 11 attacks have produced conflicting responses from PAS leaders. PAS vice-president Datuk Mustaffa Ali issued a statement last week offering conditional support for the government's condemnation of terrorism and its urging of restraint. At the same time, the party has made it clear it will not support an attack on Afghanistan. PAS religious leader and Kelantan state chief minister Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat has called for political support for any Islamic country "victimised" by the US.

An editorial in last Thursday's edition of the weekly PAS newspaper *Harakah* was even more strident. Referring in particular to Pakistan's support for the US war plans, it warned: "These hypocritical Muslim rulers can swear by the Koran that it is not a war against Islam, but no Muslim, from Morocco to Indonesia, would swallow this deceit."

Both Mahathir and the PAS leadership are manoeuvring in an uncertain political situation. Mahathir is aware that the PAS rhetoric can be turned against him as easily as it is directed against the

Pakistani leaders. Moreover these are signs of a wider public disquiet over the US actions. Last week a group of protesters gathered outside the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur holding up signs saying, “No to war, No to terrorism” and “Justice and peace without vengeance”. A delegation delivered a letter from 23 Malaysian organisations, including Christian and Buddhist groups, opposing any unilateral US military action.

While he has been cautious in his support for the US “war on terrorism,” Mahathir has not hesitated to exploit the attacks on New York and Washington to justify the use of anti-democratic methods against his political opponents. Since the beginning of the year, the government has used its draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) to detain a number of leading opposition members without trial.

For his own purposes, Mahathir has insisted that the US present evidence before any military attack on Afghanistan. But he has provided no evidence to support claims that leaders of PAS and other opposition parties have been involved in “terrorist” activities. Last week, the government signed an order that nine PAS members and supporters, including the son of Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, be held for two years without trial in the Kamunting Detention Centre. They had previously been detained under ISA provisions for an initial 60 days allegedly for their association with the Islamic militia Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM)—a group that has connections with Islamic extremist organisations in Indonesia.

Human rights activists and the country’s Human Rights Commission (Suaram) expressed concern last week that, in the name of combatting terrorism, the government was preparing a further crackdown on democratic rights. The pro-government press has been full of demands for tougher anti-terrorist measures. An editorial in the *Star* newspaper urged: “Our security, intelligence and defence apparatus must be restructured to meet this challenge. If the United States can be caught napping, so can Malaysia.” In this context it is an ominous sign that the police are preparing a report for the government on all alleged terrorists in Malaysia.

Mahathir’s hand has been temporarily strengthened by divisions in the opposition Alternative Front, which includes the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) as well as PAS, the National Justice Party (Keadilan) formed by Anwar’s wife, and the Malaysian

Peoples Party. The grouping formed in the wake of the Anwar affair has always been a fragile coalition, as Chinese and Indian supporters of DAP have been hostile to PAS’s program for an Islamic state.

DAP broke from the alliance a week ago. DAP spokesman Chen Man Hin explained that some party leaders had been reluctant to leave the front but the attacks in the US and the reaction by PAS convinced them to do so. “The Islamic state issue is something very serious and not just some far-off thing. They feel the heat of Islamic fanaticism, including the visions of the Taliban, Iran and Iraq,” he said.

While Mahathir appears to have maintained and even bolstered his position in the short-term, his government’s fortunes could rapidly change. Any US military action against Afghanistan will spark opposition within Malaysia, which, if it begins to coalesce with broader hostility to the government over the lack of democratic rights and deteriorating living standards, will quickly leave Mahathir very isolated.



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