

Malaysian government uses "terrorist" smear to bolster its political fortunes

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The Malaysian government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has been cynically exploiting the US "global war on terrorism" to undermine its political opponents, particularly the Islamic-based Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), and to lift the flagging fortunes of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

Mahathir's initial reaction to the US attacks on Afghanistan was cautious for fear of alienating the 60 percent of the country's 23 million population that is Malay and largely Muslim. Ever the political opportunist, however, he has combined mild questioning of the justice of the US war with a police roundup of alleged terrorists and a political campaign against the dangers of Islamic extremism.

The main aim has been to undercut PAS, which advocates an Islamic state and holds power in two states, Kelantan and Terengganu. PAS made inroads into the hold of Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), over the Malay vote at the 1999 national elections by campaigning against government corruption and cronyism. It appealed to the widespread resentment over the frame up and jailing of Mahathir's former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, after the two fell out over the direction of economic policy in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis.

Mahathir's attempt to regain lost ground began shortly after the terrorist attacks on the US. On September 27 the ruling coalition won 60 of the 62 seats in elections for the Sarawak state assembly. PAS and its main partner, the National Justice Party (Keadilan), the party formed by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, failed to gain a seat. PAS leader Kamaruddin Jaafar said the poor result was due to the government's campaign, which drew comparisons between PAS and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Since then Mahathir has continued to pound away on the "dangers of extremism," threatening to target PAS-run pre-schools and madrassas or religious schools. On January 19, the BN's candidate won a by-election for the state assembly seat of Indera Kayangan in the northern state of Perlis, with a substantially increased majority—up from 1,687 to 2,592 in a seat with just 7,976 voters. The otherwise insignificant by-

election attracted national attention because of the government's tactics. State-controlled television broadcast images of opposition leaders with a slow motion background of the Taliban execution of a burkha-adorned woman and pictures of US air raids in Afghanistan.

While there is certainly nothing progressive in PAS's Islamic fundamentalism, Mahathir's campaign to associate it with terrorism is a cynical distortion of the party's position. PAS condemned the September 11 attacks but strongly opposed the US war on Afghanistan—a position similar to that of the government. PAS leaders have, however, been more strident in their calls for Muslims to support Afghanistan, characterising the US intervention as a crusade against Islam—points that have been seized upon by the prime minister.

Moreover, Mahathir's attack on "Islamic extremism" is completely hypocritical. Since the country's independence in 1957, few individuals have done more to promote communalist politics in Malaysia than Mahathir. He came to prominence in UMNO after the race riots of 1969, which were stage-managed by UMNO in response to a significant electoral setback. Mahathir championed the policy of giving special political and commercial privileges to Malays at the expense of ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

The political objective was to keep Malaysians divided on ethnic lines so that race questions smothered questions of social class and social inequality. UMNO was never reluctant to stir up racial tensions whenever its position was under threat. Over the last three decades, the policies of favouring Malays have produced a layer of well-off businessmen and professionals, many with close links to UMNO.

PAS emerged as an extension of UMNO's communal politics. It represented sections of the Malay elite who have not benefitted from UMNO connections and appealed to the conservatism, particularly of poor rural Malays, who lacked access to facilities and services. The ruling class as a whole has adapted itself to the UMNO's racial politics, including the opposition parties—Keadilan party and the

mainly ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), which contested the 1999 elections in partnership with PAS.

At the same time as smearing PAS as “terrorist,” the government has carried out a series of police raids to further intimidate its opponents. UMNO is notorious for dealing with political opposition through trumped-up charges and the country’s draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial. Now Mahathir has the ideal pretext—the global hunt for “terrorists”—to intensify the police dragnet which was underway before September 11.

Currently 47 people are being detained as “extremists” under the ISA. Last August the government arrested 25 alleged members of the Islamic group Kumpulan Mujahhidin Malaysia (KMM). Among those being held without trial for two years in the Kamunting Detention Centre is the son of PAS leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, as well as at least eight other PAS members and supporters. Those arrested were accused of undertaking terrorist training and planning to overthrow the government but the police have produced no evidence to support their allegations nor is any required under the ISA.

Prior to the Indera Kayangan by-election, another 15 were detained. On the morning of the poll, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced that police had detained another seven people suspected of links to Al Qaeda. Previously the government has insisted those arrested were KMM members but it now claims 22 of the detainees are members of the Jemaah Islamiah organisation, accused by Singapore of planning attacks on US facilities and personnel. Singapore, which is just as infamous as Malaysia for trampling on democratic rights, detained 15 alleged Jemaah Islamiah members in December and accused the group of having links to Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir and to Al Qaeda.

A Malaysian High Court decision in December is an indication of the type of treatment that may be meted out to alleged terrorists. The court handed down death sentences to three leaders of the Al-Ma’unah Islamic sect for stealing weapons from an army camp, supposedly to bring down the government and establish an Islamic state. Sixteen others were given life sentences. The official account of the raid on an army camp by the previously unknown group in July 2000 met with considerable scepticism. Mahathir had to personally appear on television to assure the public it was not a government stage-managed provocation. Of those sentenced to death, one was a former army private, one a former police commando and the third a serving army major.

The Malaysian government’s tough stance on alleged terrorists has drawn high praise from Washington. Under the Clinton administration, relations between the two countries

were strained over Mahathir’s protectionist economic policies and the related Anwar affair. Mahathir and Bush, however, have spoken on the phone and exchanged letters.

Commenting on the warmth of the new ties, US ambassador to Malaysia Marie Huhtala told the press: “We have had excellent cooperation on locating and freezing any assets that might be in your banks that belong to terrorists, and particularly cooperation with your police in tracking down terrorists. This is just invaluable. Malaysia has done a fantastic job. We would like to continue to see trade flows going well and to have a good environment for our businessmen.”

As if by way of an afterthought, Huhtala added: “[Human rights] is always an area of concern for us and in that regard, we are going to be following the court appeals of Anwar.” The ambassador, like the Bush administration, did not bother to square the obvious contradiction between “concern” over the democratic rights of Anwar, and a complete lack of concern over the rights of those being held without trial as alleged terrorists.

While Mahathir may have gained a temporary political advantage with the “terrorist” smear, none of the underlying social and political issues in Malaysia have been resolved. The economy is still weak and many Malaysians are feeling the effects. As a result the government does not hesitate to use police state methods to maintain an atmosphere of intimidation and threat. A Home Ministry spokesman Aseh Che Mat recently foreshadowed more arrests as a result of the “cooperation” of those currently being held and interrogated by the police.



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