

Washington rolls out the welcome mat for Malaysia's Mahathir

John Roberts
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The effusive praise heaped on Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad last week by a senior US official is a sign of the warm welcome he is likely to receive in Washington next month—a marked shift from the cool relations that existed under the Clinton administration. In order to pursue closer ties with Malaysia's rightwing ruler, Bush has all but buried the previous official expressions of concern about Mahathir's anti-democratic methods and barely disguised frame-up of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Bush's "war on terrorism" has occasioned the new warmth. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly, who was in Kuala Lumpur last week to prepare for Mahathir's trip, hailed the Malaysian leader for his "stirring response in the global campaign against terror". Malaysia, he declared, was a "beacon of stability in the region," adding: "It is important for us to further co-operate in the matter and improve our bilateral relations." Significantly, Mahathir's visit to Washington on May 13-14 will be his first since 1994.

Kelly's high praise stems from Mahathir's use of the country's notorious Internal Security Act (ISA) to round up 48 alleged terrorist suspects last year. The ISA, which provides for lengthy detention without trial, has long been used in Malaysia as a means of intimidating and jailing political opponents. In fact, the latest series of arrests began prior to the September 11 attacks and was directed primarily at undermining the largest opposition party—the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). After the terrorist attacks on the US, Mahathir was able to continue his political offensive against PAS, with the backing of the US, all in the name of the "global campaign against terror".

No doubt there has been behind-the-scenes cooperation between the US and Malaysian governments, as well as their intelligence agencies. The Malaysian arrests, together with parallel detentions in Singapore and the Philippines, have proven a useful means for the Bush administration to depict South East Asia as a "hub" for international terrorists. Conveniently, the detainees in Malaysia and Singapore cannot answer the charges as they are being held behind bars without trial or legal representation.

Mahathir has proved helpful also in applying pressure to Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who has been repeatedly accused in the US of being uncooperative in the so-called anti-terror campaign. The South East Asian "hub" allegedly involves two Indonesian clerics—Abu Bakar and Riudan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali—who are accused of being behind various terrorist plots. While Singapore has openly supported Washington's call for Jakarta to arrest the two, Mahathir has reportedly given the same message to Megawati privately.

The Bush administration's growing fondness for Mahathir is despite his muted opposition to the US war on Afghanistan and his criticisms of Israel's war on the Palestinians and US policy in the Middle East. This month the Malaysian leader toured Morocco, Libya and Bahrain, calling for a united Islamic front against Israel. Washington takes such comments with a grain of salt—they are part of Mahathir's balancing act between the US and his base of support at home among the largely Islamic Malay majority. In fact, Mahathir's manoeuvres enhance his value to Washington as a moderate Muslim leader, in conditions where Bush's reckless policy has compelled conservative regimes in the Middle East to maintain their distance.

A key indicator of Washington's attitude to Mahathir

is its stance on his jailed opponent, Anwar Ibrahim. Questioned by the media on the issue, Kelly replied that he had not discussed Anwar's treatment with Mahathir, even though Anwar and six of his supporters, also detained under the ISA, were on a hunger strike designed to embarrass Mahathir prior to his US visit.

Kelly snubbed the opposition parties pointedly refusing to meet with any of their leaders. Instead, junior US officials were dispatched to see Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, and express the "hope" that Anwar would receive a fair hearing in current appeals against his convictions. Wan Azizah issued a limp statement declaring that Anwar's case "was still in their [the US administration] minds".

Kelly's visit is in marked contrast to the Clinton administration's reaction to the Anwar trials. Al Gore, US Vice President and Democratic Party presidential candidate, denounced Anwar's second convictions as a "show trial" that "mocked international standards of justice". US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote to Wan Azizah, who had formed the National Justice Party (Keadilan), to denounce Mahathir and tell her: "There are certain countries where people deserve better. Malaysia is one of them."

Gore's remarks had nothing to do with any genuine concern for democratic rights in Malaysia. The Clinton administration's hostility to Mahathir and support for Anwar was bound up with the opposed economic policies of the two men—the basis for their falling out during the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998.

In response to the meltdown of the Asian "tigers", Washington, in league with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), insisted on its long-held agenda of open market reform throughout East Asia. But Mahathir refused to toe the line. He introduced a series of currency and capital controls and used state funds to bale out bankrupt firms, many of them closely associated with his ruling United National Malays Organisation (UMNO). Anwar, on the other hand, who was also finance minister, openly advocated the IMF line.

When Anwar refused to agree to the capital and currency controls, Mahathir sacked him and then expelled him and his supporters from UMNO. After Anwar began to openly campaign against Mahathir, calling for economic and political reform, he was arrested on trumped-up charges of corruption and

sodomy. In the two trials in 1999 and 2000, Anwar was sentenced to a total of 15 years imprisonment.

Gore championed Anwar's cause as a means of undermining Mahathir, whose resistance to IMF policies threatened US economic interests in the region. While the opposition to Mahathir drew broad support from those hit by the economic crisis and concerned over the lack of democratic rights, Anwar's leadership relied heavily on Washington's backing. This orientation remains, seen in the latest attempt by Anwar and his supporters to draw attention to their plight with a hunger strike aimed at securing political support from Bush.

Bush, however, has dispensed with the façade of democratic rights as the means for pushing US interests in South East Asia. Instead, under the banner of "fighting terrorism," his administration is seeking to build-up the US presence in the region, in part through closer military and intelligence ties. Mahathir's assistance in this project explains why Washington, temporarily at least, has put out the welcome mat for Malaysia's conservative political strongman.



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