

# From ASEAN Chair to UN Security Council: Malaysian Foreign Policy in 2015

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## **From ASEAN Chair to UN Security Council: Malaysian Foreign Policy in 2015**

*By Rashaad Ali*

### **Synopsis**

*In a tumultuous year for domestic politics in Malaysia, its international roles in the UN Security Council and as chair of ASEAN have come under increased scrutiny.*

### **Commentary**

WITH THE year coming to a close, Malaysia's membership in the United Nations Security Council over the past year in light of its concurrent chairmanship of ASEAN 2015 and the rumblings of its domestic politics make the country an interesting case study. A quick examination of the Security Council's voting and veto records shows a quiet and agreeable non-permanent member of the Security Council more concerned with not jeopardising its international reputation in the continuing face of domestic discontent.

Along with its relatively quiet albeit marginally successful performance as chair of ASEAN 2015 despite the ongoing regional haze problem, Malaysia's inclusion in the Security Council has largely gone unnoticed in the domestic arena amidst various political scandals and a tumbling economy.

### **International Episodes: MH17 and Rohingya Refugee Crisis**

In a year that has seen the Security Council adopt 48 resolutions to date, equally important are those that have been vetoed by a permanent member of the Security Council. Here an obvious example presents itself in the form of the resolution to form an international tribunal to investigate Malaysian airliner MH17, a resolution strongly pushed by the Malaysian contingent during the month of its presidency.

Unsurprisingly, the resolution was vetoed by Russia, who accused other countries of politicising the vote, and Ukraine for blocking Russia's involvement in the investigation. This dealt a quiet blow to Malaysia who would have largely benefited from this positive move in a matter that had, up until that point, continued in a stalemate, raising its domestic and international profile in the process.

This year has also heavily featured a humanitarian crisis of refugees with Malaysia once again called into action due to the persecution of Rohingyas in Myanmar. During the early months of the year, thousands of refugees arrived off the shores of Malaysia and Indonesia stranded in boats and struggling to survive. In a manner of appeasement that has come to typify ASEAN relations, each country sought to avoid responsibility as much as possible and refused admission of the refugees on their border while struggling to condemn Myanmar for the persecution of its own citizens.

After significant public and international pressure shortly after releasing a statement asking refugees to 'go back to your country', Malaysia eventually relented and accepted 3000 refugees on a temporary basis, all the while with UNHCR refugees in Malaysia not granted the right to work by the government. In what is themed as the year of the ASEAN Community that would aim to impress a greater sense of ASEAN consciousness on the people of South East Asia, the handling of the refugee crisis by the chair of ASEAN did not reflect well on its overall leadership.

### **ASEAN: Mixed results**

Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN has garnered a little more success in other areas; a strong push for an ASEAN regional peacekeeping force has made strides in recent months following the announcement of the initiative back in February. With Southeast Asia facing renewed concerns of radicalisation and other forms of transnational crime, such a move seems sensible; indeed this was reiterated by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's combative stance against Islamic State during his speech at the UN General Assembly earlier this month.

Certainly Malaysia's privileged position in the Security Council aided the peacekeeping initiative significantly, building on its existing modest peace-brokering efforts. However this success is mitigated by yet another regional haze issue, reflecting poorly on ASEAN collaboration and cohesion.

### **Public perception and domestic politics**

At this juncture, the question of public perception is important. The signing of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration in Combating Transnational Crime was quite literally overshadowed by haze concerns while on the international scene, local dailies are hardly going to report on the banalities of Security Council resolutions. It was unfortunate for Malaysia that the sole newsworthy item during the month of its presidency was the vetoed MH17 tribunal; although to be fair this was hardly due to Kuala Lumpur's fault.

The unfortunate reality is that a country of Malaysia's size and stature will always struggle to get any form of traction, and despite simultaneously holding a seat in the

Security Council along with the ASEAN chairmanship has done little to dispel the negative climate. Malaysia has struggled to escape the spectre of its domestic politics at both an international and domestic level despite the best efforts of the Najib administration to deflect sticky issues and its various shortcomings.

It is usually argued that membership in the Security Council enhances the reputation of a country significantly, and considering Malaysia's concurrent chairmanship of ASEAN, 2015 was set to be a good year for the country at a regional and international level. Instead, political scandals, public demonstrations and numerous allegations of corruption have not only stymied any enhancement of image that could have been lent by the country's involvement in the UN and ASEAN, but domestic politics have also taken front and centre in both domestic news any whatever international coverage the country receives.

Malaysia's 'moderation' campaign for the Security Council rings hollow in the face of growing conservatism and alienation of minority populations. Persecution of opposition Members of Parliament and political activists throws its participation in esteemed international bodies in doubt, while Najib's attempts to dispel the fear amongst international investors fall flat in the face of a declining currency.

Perhaps Malaysia suffered from ill timing: the eruption of political scandals and public discontent in 2015 surely was not taken into account during the country's Security Council membership campaign period. Certainly the opportunity to hold a position both in the Security Council and in ASEAN represented a prime opportunity to realise loftier ambitions, whether in the form of continuing economic regionalism or enhancing its international reputation in the year the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement was due to be signed.

However, Malaysia on the international scene cannot be viewed in isolation and separate from its domestic troubles. The compound failure at various stages whether in domestic politics, its fledging economy, a tumbling ringgit, a bi-yearly haze problem or unsolved aviation disasters - paints an unfortunate and tumultuous year for the country and a missed opportunity for a small country to punch above its weight.

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