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Malaysia's Opposition to the Iraq War: A Matter of Principle or Expediency?

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Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S, Malaysia stepped forward as an unlikely but welcome ally for Washington in the latter's ensuing war on terrorism. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad swiftly linked his government's own efforts at fighting Islamic militants at home to Washington's global war on terror. Kuala Lumpur moved to enhance bilateral security ties with Washington by signing an anti-terrorism accord and agreeing to set up a Counter-Terrorism Centre in Malaysia in cooperation with Washington. Such was the extent of U.S.-Malaysia conviviality that during a visit to Washington in May 2002, Mahathir was reported to have made the portentous comment: "If you can overthrow Saddam, by all means do it. Just don't make the Iraqi people pay for it" ("Malaysia Backs Saddam Ouster", Washington Times, 16 May 2002).

Shared interest, however, belied fundamental differences over the roadmap of the terrorism war. In particular, the Malaysian government opposed Washington's attempt to extend the war on terrorism to Iraq, which Washington put forth as a *raison d'être* to military action against Baghdad. Instead, Prime Minister Mahathir argued that Iraq was merely "a side issue" in the terrorism war. In particular, Kuala Lumpur believed that it was not the dismantling of "tyrannical regimes" such as those in Iraq, or previously in Afghanistan, that would cut the ground from under the feet of Islamic militancy, but the reformulation of American policy towards Israel and Palestine.

At the Forefront of International Condemnation

The Malaysian government has been proactive in orchestrating condemnation of the U.S. war on Iraq. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Malaysia was already actively involved in marshalling international diplomatic opinion against American policy. Prime Minister Mahathir had taken advantage of Malaysia's chair of the Non-Aligned Movement to formulate a resolution rejecting a US-led attack on Iraq without the sanction of the United Nations. The Malaysian government has also led the Organisation of Islamic Countries in protest against military action.

At home, ruling and opposition parties, as well as NGOs, have united in condemnation of the invasion of Iraq. The Malaysian Parliament unanimously adopted a motion condemning the unilateral military action against Iraq by the U.S., and passed seven resolutions setting out an official position on the Iraq war. The leaders of the youth

movements of UMNO and PAS led a joint demonstration outside the U.S. Embassy on 25 March. This followed a massive, state-organised anti-war demonstration at the Merdeka Stadium that was attended by 50 000 people, including the entire cabinet. UMNO Youth spearheads a national peace movement (*Aman Malaysia*) that is lobbying the United Nations to investigate the “war crimes” of America and its allies and bring the “perpetrators” to court.

The Logic Behind Malaysian Opposition

Malaysia’s opposition to the invasion of Iraq has been based on the principle of legality or lack thereof. Insofar as Kuala Lumpur is concerned, Iraqi possession of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) has not been proven. Concomitantly, it has criticised the selectivity of American policy, juxtaposing Washington’s war against Iraq with the policy on North Korea, where the admission to possession of WMD by a “rogue state” has been met not by the beating of war drums, but by urgings for restraint and negotiation. Further, Malaysia has criticised Washington’s reluctance to pressure Israel not only on the matter of possession of WMD, but also on its non-compliance with relevant UNSC resolutions pertaining to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories.

Malaysia has also vehemently opposed the objective of regime change, contrary to what Dr. Mahathir was alleged to have expressed to the *Washington Times*, arguing that only Iraqis have the right to determine the fate of President Saddam Hussein. Not surprisingly, Prime Minister Mahathir has openly expressed his suspicions that American action belied the imperialist intent Washington had always had to control affairs in the Middle East. Such comments reflect the widely held view within both the government and opposition that Washington is “barking up the wrong tree” by thinking that invasion and the presence of American and British troops *en masse* will bring about the kind of change envisaged by the Bush administration. To their minds, such a policy would serve only to embitter Arab sentiments and nurture terrorism.

In essence, Kuala Lumpur’s principled opposition to the war stems from its position that because military action has no legitimacy under existing U.N. resolutions, it is a blatant contravention of international law.

An American War against Islam?

Malaysian opposition to the war is also linked to wider concerns that Washington’s policy is tantamount to an American war against Islam. Given the political constellation in Malaysia, such a perception would have implications for the political fortunes of Malaysia’s ruling coalition government, which has traditionally enjoyed close relations with the U.S.

Notwithstanding much effort on the part of the Bush administration to emphasize that this war was not against Islam but only against the secular regime of Saddam Hussein, an attack against a Muslim country like Iraq can easily be perceived as an attack against Muslims. This point has been repeatedly stressed by Dr. Mahathir, although he has also noted that given the number of Western states that have opposed the American action, it is an American, not Western, war against Islam. This logic appeared justified in the eyes of Malaysia’s Muslim community, to whom the contradictory American positions on Iraq and North Korea serve only to accentuate these suspicions.

A central concern of Kuala Lumpur is the possibility that Islamic militants might

exploit the invasion of Iraq in seeking further justification for their objectives, and this would place unnecessary pressure on the governments of moderate Muslim countries who are fighting these radicals on the home front. Malaysia is one such country, where the prevailing concern is that the war in Iraq will detract American commitment to the battle against terrorism in Southeast Asia. Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi has already warned in a recent interview with BBC that with Baghdad's threats of reprisals against supporters of U.S. aggression, as well as its use of suicide bombers against U.S. military forces, the war in Iraq is already breeding a new wave of terror, which might soon spread to Southeast Asia in the absence of full American commitment.

Moreover, with a general election looming, the government would be well aware of the folly of appearing to tolerate American action against Iraq for fear of alienating Muslim votes. The government's relations with the U.S. will almost certainly come under close scrutiny by the opposition PAS. There is even concern that UMNO will face internal pressures to downgrade relations with the U.S., particularly from backbenchers who play to domestic audiences. In this respect, moderate Muslim leaders such as Mahathir and Abdullah Badawi have reiterated to Washington, both publicly and in private, the dangers of prolonging American involvement in the Arab world without any fundamental change in America's Middle East policy.

Conclusion

The war on Iraq has fundamental implications for both Malaysia's international relations as well as the country's domestic political balance. Malaysia may not be a significant country in the strategic calculations of Washington in terms of its size and population, but it does play an important role as an example of a successful moderate Muslim majority country and a progressive and democratic Islamic state. In this regard, it is unlikely that Kuala Lumpur's vehement opposition to the war in Iraq would generate any strong retribution from Washington. It is in Washington's interest to maintain support for moderate Muslim governments such as Malaysia as the war on terror and Islamic militancy ensues.

More important for the government of Malaysia however, are the ramifications of the war on domestic politics. As the battle for Malay-Muslim votes intensifies, it is likely that both UMNO and PAS would capitalise on their respective anti-war platforms as part of attempts to "out-Islam" each other. Nevertheless, Kuala Lumpur's policy towards Washington will come under increasing scrutiny in the context of domestic politics. Further, the war in Iraq may well introduce a new and unwelcome dimension to the regional battle against terrorism in which the government of Malaysia is a central player.

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