



VIEW: Which way new Malaysia? — Farish A Noor



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Fresh from his near-overwhelming victory at the March 2004 elections, Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi seems to be trying to chart the country's trajectory for the near future. Like most countries, however, Malaysia's political leadership seems unsure of its standing unless and until it has been endorsed by the powers-that-be in the USA and Britain. Hence the recent trip to Washington and London to visit George W Bush and Tony Blair despite the fact that both men may soon be out of job themselves.

The prime minister's visit also included a brief stop over in Paris. It was clear, however, that the trip abroad was meant to signify that Malaysia was under a new political leadership and that Prime Minister Badawi was now in charge.

Badawi's visit to Washington and London got the saturation coverage that most have come to expect from the docile Malaysian press, which has long since been in the service of the government and UNMO, the ruling party. The mainstream papers, particularly the English press, waxed eloquent about the importance of the trip and the need for Malaysia to send out a clear message to the West: namely, that the country would now seek to work closely with other states and that Malaysia's stand towards the West per se would no longer be confrontational.

The bonus came when President Bush Jr, the Grand Ayatollah of the White House, bestowed upon Malaysia the coveted titles of 'moderate Muslim state' and 'model Islamic country'. It seems that some Muslim countries today cannot believe that they are actually 'moderate' unless they are told so by America. Muslim governments worldwide seem to be falling over one another to win favour with the White House, No 10 Downing Street and the Wall Street. While the lay Muslim may still think of Mecca as his qiblat, it is clear that Muslim leaders recognise Washington as their political qiblat.

A political advisor of the Malaysian government pointed out that Badawi's visit should not be taken out of context. It came in the wake of several important visits to neighbouring countries: "Before going to Washington and London, the prime minister went on several trips to Singapore and other ASEAN countries. This shows that as far as Malaysian foreign policy is concerned, we still put our ASEAN neighbours first and that Asia and East Asia remain of primary importance to us."

That may be the case, but it was also clear that the visit to the West — to the United States in particular — was given greater emphasis and attention by the Malaysian government and the government-controlled media. Also, Malaysia's relationship with the US hardly compares with its relationship with the Philippines or Indonesia, for the former is infinitely more powerful and demanding.

It is the uneven nature of Malaysia's relationship with the United States, and also Singapore — long regarded by many old school bureaucrats and administrators of the Mahathir generation as a country with competitive interests towards Malaysia — that worries many senior government figures. Said a retired senior bureaucrat: "It seems as if everything we achieved during the Mahathir era is being turned back. We are bending over backwards to please the Americans and Singaporeans. Mahathir may have made some mistakes in his domestic policies, but it should not be forgotten that the Malaysian public was never in doubt about his foreign policy. We took a firm stand on matters related to Palestine and Bosnia, and we were adamant in our refusal to bend to the will of the international financial market. It now seems that we are overly supportive of the US and allowing even the Singaporeans to buy into Malaysian companies like Telecoms. Why? What do we have to gain from this?"

During his visit to the US, Prime Minister Badawi was pressed by President Bush to allow Malaysian troops to be sent to Iraq, as part of some Muslim peacekeeping force. The prime minister, to his credit, did not immediately agree to the proposal, and noted that no such force could ever be sent unless and until situation in Iraq changed. During the Mahathir era the answer would have been more to the point. Mahathir's comment to the US government was blunt: "You broke it (Iraq), you fix it!"

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media went to town with the exaggerated claim that Malaysia was willing to join in the coalition of the willing. Badawi's recent visit to Washington and London, questionable under the present circumstances as both leaders could lose elections in the near future, raised more questions about the direction of Malaysian foreign policy and the fate of Mahathir's legacy. A Yemeni news editor remarked: "During the Mahathir era Malaysia stood out for one thing: Its principled foreign policy and its defence of Muslim and Third World concerns. If that goes, what will you have left?"

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