MALAYSIA: WINNERS AND LOSERS

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« If Malaysia did not exist, it would need to be invented », could be one way of describing the impact of 11th September on this Southeast Asian nation of some 22 million inhabitants. In avoiding the dangerous characterisation of the « war » against terrorism as one between civilisations, there is a desperate need for an exemplary modern Muslim country, one which has, ostensibly at least, demonstrated that Islam is neither incompatible with economic development nor with modernity nor with an, apparently, democratic form of political stability. To fully appreciate the changes that have occurred it is necessary to look at political situation in Malaysia prior to 11th September and afterwards.

The Malaysian Prime Minister has consistently maintained an anti-Western rhetoric even prior to his appointment as Malaysian Prime Minister in 1981. This discourse in itself was not very problematical until the financial crisis of 1997. Until that period the somewhat old-fashioned anti-colonial rhetoric - designed for internal consumption - was balanced by an open arms acceptance of Western investment. The economic crisis and the subsequent self-induced political crisis triggered by the arrest and imprisonment (or, in more robust language, the judicial « assassination ») of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, changed the situation. The reversion to a domestic solution to the crisis within Malaysia (capital controls, reshuffling of the corporate cards, Keynesian pump priming), was echoed on the international level with Malaysia's classing amongst a group of undesirable states. Within Malaysia itself the political pre-eminence of UMNO was severely tested in the 2000 elections when more than half of the

Malay population voted for the opposition parties. The governing coalition, the Barisan Nasional, owed its electoral triumph tot he support of non-Malay voters. In prison Anwar Ibrahim was proving to be a more formidable opponent to Mahathir than previously. As late as six months ago Mahathir's days seem to have been numbered and a new equation in Malaysian politics on the horizon.

Since the terrorist attacks, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed, has been able to reinforce his position within Malaysia. Three factors have been instrumental in this political resurrection which, in order of importance, are the international context, proactive responses from the Mahathir administration and the internal problems of the political opposition within Malaysia.

Immediately after the bombings, Mahathir came out with a strong condemnation of the terrorist bombings, a condemnation echoed by most of the opposition parties. Telephoned by US President George W. Bush, granted an extended meeting during the APEC summit in Shanghai in October 2001, feted by US business leaders in Kuala Lumpur, Mahathir has refound a statue as the acceptable face of Islam on the international scene. Within the broad coalition against terrorism the US administration has shown itself willing to be understanding of the behaviour of erstwhile allies, whether it be Russian action in Chechnya or Chinese repression of Muslim minorities within China. In the future once the conflict has reached a point where the US can declare victory it is highly likely that moderate Muslim regimes, such as that of Indonesia, will be given a role in the new international order. Mahathir has played a rather astute game: support of the campaign against terrorism while highly critical of US military action in Afghanistan.

On the domestic level, early in August the government arrested ten people under the Internal Security Act, which allows detention without trial for up to two years. Police claimed that those detained, including the son of the leader of the opposition Islamic party, PAS, Nik Abdul Aziz, were members of the Mujahideen Group of Malaysia whose objective was to topple the Malaysian government by force. The events of 11th September gave credibility - both internationally and domestically - to the Mahathir government's attempt to portray PAS as an extremist group. Keeping within the paradigm described by Harold Crouch as a responsive-

repressive regime[1] (1), the Mahathir government also declared that Malaysia was in fact an « Islamic state ». While no substance whatsoever was given to what this declaration in fact meant it successfully cut the ground from under the feet of the main opposition party, PAS.

It is this third factor, the ineptitude of the opposition loosely allied under the Barisan National, that is allowing Mahathir and UMNO a predominant role in Malaysia. The main opposition party, Pas, has shown an extraordinary inability to evolve beyond its rural conservative base to embrace a more modernist approach. PAS organised several demonstrations involving a few thousand people to demonstrate outside the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur. The Barisan Alternatif is itself suffering from internal implosion. On 22nd September the largely Chinese Democratic Action Party left the coalition essentially over PAS's unwillingness to temper its objective of an Islamic state, but also in reaction to PAS's ambiguous position on the 11th September bombings[2]. (2) The third party within the opposition coalition, Keadilan, headed by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah, which served as the bridge between PAS and the DAP has also shown signs of unravelling. On 17th October three of its leaders left the party. In the end the ostensible strength of this attempt at multiracial politics, namely the bringing together of NGO activists, former UMNO politicians, Malays, Indians and Chinese, proved to be its fundamental weakness. All of this exacerbated by the personal leadership of Anwar playing differently with different elements in his party.

In conclusion the Malaysian experience demonstrates how a developing state with a semi-democratic political system and a constrained if burgeoning civil society can be profoundly buffeted by events as dramatic in the short term - while inconsequential in the long term, as the events of 11th September.

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[1] Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1996.
[2] S. Jayasankaran & Lorien Holland « Malaysia: Profiting from Fear *», Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 Oct. 2001.