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IMPACT OF 9-11 ON MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE – ONE YEAR AFTER

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Malaysia, with a Muslim majority population and a Malay-dominated government, and Singapore, with less than a fifth of its predominantly Chinese population Muslim, have shown remarkably similar responses to the threat of terrorism uncovered after the attacks on America on 11 Sep 01. The constitutionally similar but politically different countries were one in fighting the Malayan Communist “terrorists” in the 1950’s and 60’s. They were as one in condemning the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and pledged full support for the US-led effort to combat terrorism. Both Malaysia and Singapore cooperated with the United States through exchange of intelligence information and coordinating security measures against possible terrorist attacks.

Both countries exercised their powers under the Internal Security Act to arrest scores of Muslims involved in plots to carry out violent attacks against government and western targets in their territories and the region. Singapore security authorities detained 13 Singapore members of a group called Jemaah Islamiyah, linked to the Al Qaeda terrorist organization, planning the bombing of Singapore defence installations and US and other western embassies. Malaysia arrested nearly 50 people belonging to militant Muslim groups such as the Kumpulan Militant Malaysia which had links to the JI and AQ networks. They were said to have the common objective of overthrowing the existing governments in the region and establishing an Islamic caliphate called Darul Islam Nusantara embracing Indonesia, Malaysia, Southern Thailand and Mindanao in the Southern Philippines. (Singapore and Muslim Brunei, as two small states in the midst of the region, would inevitably be included as well.)

War in Afghanistan

However the US-led military campaign against Afghanistan to destroy the Al Qaeda terrorist nests and the Taliban regime supporting them, evoked different responses in Malaysia and Singapore. Malaysia distanced itself from military action against Afghanistan. PM Mahathir Mohammad condemned the US bombings of purported terrorist and military targets which caused heavy civilian casualties, describing it as a wanton killing of Muslims. While there were angry demonstrations by Opposition PAS members and clerics in Malaysia against the American action in Afghanistan, the Government poured cold water on their calls for Muslims to join the Afghans in fighting enemies of Islam, asking how these jihadis hoped to overcome the missiles and bombs of the US forces.

While Singapore gave logistical support to the US military effort, by providing access to bases for US aircraft and naval ships, it also called for a quick end to the military campaign and greater international efforts to rebuild a post-Taliban Afghanistan. Singapore's strong support for the US-led war against terror was buttressed by its participation in the US initiative for Container Security, i.e., by instituting X-ray scanning of container cargo bound for US ports. Extra security precautions were also taken at the port, airport and oil and petrochemical installations such as on Jurong Island against possible sea-borne terrorist attacks.

International Relations Consequences

Malaysia's open support for the war against terrorism gained it the appreciation and renewed goodwill of the US administration and Congress. Relations between the two countries, had been strained since the 1998 sacking, detention, trial and jailing of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and the backing for reformasi given by the Clinton Administration. The shared concern about terror thawed the relations and PM Mahathir was received warmly by President Bush in Washington last May. They agreed about the need to address the roots causes of terrorism, e.g., the hopelessness that turns desperate young people into potential killers, such as the suicide bombers in Palestine. Mahathir went further than most Muslim leaders in seeking to get the Islamic World to condemn such suicide bombings but was unable to get agreement from the Organisation of Islamic Conference on a common definition of terrorism that would include such tactics.

Malaysia's support for the Palestinian cause however remained undiminished. And Mahathir continued to condemn Israeli military occupation and suppression of Palestine as state terrorism. Malaysia's support for the Iraqi people in the face of UN sanctions and US military attacks also remained strong. Mahathir condemned the renewed US-UK bombing of targets in northern Iraq and their plans for a war against Iraq without justifiable cause.

Singapore's close relations with the United States were reinforced by its open support for the war against terror. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew was received at the White House before Mahathir's visit, while its Defence Ministers exchanged visits. US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Singapore and Malaysia, among other ASEAN capitals, on the way to the ASEAN Regional Forum in Brunei. ASEAN and US signed a joint cooperation framework agreement to counter terrorism, mainly involving exchange of intelligence information and enhancing communication to check on cross-border movement of terrorist and funding for terrorist groups.

Political Consequences

Malaysia's strong stand against terrorism gained popular support combined with his opposition to US-support for Israeli suppression of Palestinians and condemnation of US bombings of Afghanistan and Iraq. The arrest of four dozen militant Muslims, some of them linked to the Opposition Islamic Party, PAS, put that party on the defensive while raising the image of UMNO as a party of moderate Muslims. However, Opposition parties charged that the government was using the pretext of terrorists to get rid of political opponents. And the ruling party's attempt to out-Islamise PAS by declaring that Malaysia was already an Islamic country failed to make a dent in PAS' political support among the rural Malay population particularly in the northern states of Malaysia. With an ulema as its new leader, PAS looks set on making further inroads in the Malay ground in the next general election.

In Singapore, the 911 attacks on the US by Muslim terrorists and the arrests of the Jemaah Islamiya group sensitised the population and made Muslim groups defensive about the existence of Muslim militants in the country. Government-inspired efforts were initiated to make the whole population more aware of the various religions and inform the non-Muslims about the true nature of Islam and the Islamic way of life. Inter-racial confidence circles were formed to foster better understanding and goodwill among the various communities. The government and Muslim political leaders came out urging the Muslim community to speak up for moderate and mainstream Muslim observances, and for reform of the Islamic education curriculum to include mathematics and sciences and other subjects more relevant to the modern world and globalised economy. However a small group of Muslims sought to test the limits of their freedom of faith by insisting on their children being allowed to wear the Muslim headscarf when attending government schools, at variance to the school uniform.

In Malaysia the government introduced a similar move to reform the curriculum of Islamic religious schools and have the teaching of mathematics and science subjects in English in national schools. Western-educated Muslim intellectuals also began debating Islamic issues with the conservative ulemas to reform the rules governing family, women, and society and resist the introduction of the hudud punishment and restrictive practices for Muslims.

Conclusion

In both Malaysia and Singapore, the battle for the soul of Islam was joined between the advocates of moderate liberal Islam and those preaching a conservative, literal and strict Islamic code for Muslims everywhere. This battle for hearts and minds, carried out openly, would buttress the war against terrorism waged by the governments of these two separate, politically dissimilar but interlinked countries with similar systems of government and security apparatus and administration of justice. However Muslims in both countries are likely to be angered by a US-led attack on Iraq that inflicted massive civilian casualties and damage, unless it is backed by UN Security Council resolutions and the duration is short.

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