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Anti-Mubarak Protests in Malaysia: How Arab Issues Travel

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Synopsis

The current unrest gripping Arab countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen has led to demonstrations of support in other parts of the Muslim world, including Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, do the protests signal a worsening of Malaysian-American ties?

Commentary

THE WAVE of unrest and public demonstrations that have spread across Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen have had an impact on other parts of the Muslim world. The repercussions have been felt as far as Southeast Asia with Islamists and pro-democracy activists in Malaysia taking the opportunity to join in the chorus of dissent to express their support for the protesters in Egypt. In the process what began as an Arab concern has taken on local meanings in the Malaysian context.

Malaysian Spillover

On Friday, 4 February 2011 a large demonstration took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where more than 3000 demonstrators took to the streets after performing their Friday prayers at two mosques close to the United States Embassy. As has become the norm in Malaysia for more than a decade now, the demonstration followed the familiar pattern of crowds first gathering for Friday prayers at mosques close to the embassy.

After the prayers the crowds marched towards the embassy which is a prominent landmark on Jalan Tun Razak -- conspicuous by virtue of its size and the heavy security presence there. In the event, a memorandum was handed over to American Embassy officials, calling on the United States to stop supporting the Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak and to allow for the transition to democracy in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world.

Since the pro-Taliban rallies of 2002, the American Embassy has been the focal point of many anti-Western demonstrations in Malaysia, and the pattern of the demonstrations has been largely similar. In the latest incident, the anti-Mubarak demonstration led to the arrest of a small number of protesters and the use of water canons by the police to disperse the marchers.

No change to Anti-Americanism

Several salient observations can be made about the 4 February demonstration in KL, which serves as an indicator of US-Malaysian ties at the moment and the level of anti-Americanism that may or may not be prevalent among Malaysians today:

Firstly, many of the organisers of the demonstration came from the opposition parties of Malaysia, notably the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS and the Malaysian Socialist Party (PSM). A small representation of Anwar Ibrahim's People's Justice Party (PKR) was also at the scene. Notwithstanding the visible support of the PSM Socialists and the secular NGOs, an overwhelming majority of those who took part were Malay-Muslims. Many of the spokesmen and leaders of the demonstration were also leaders of PAS, with its leaders Muhammad Sabu, Ridhuan Mohd Nor and Salahudin Ayub being the most prominent. Despite general calls for mass participation that were circulated through the Internet, it seems that the demonstration elicited mainly the interest of Malay-Muslims.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that while a PKR divisional chief Badrul Hisham Shaharin was present, there were no major figures of the PKR at the demonstration. Local media reports remained silent over the question of whether members and leaders of the other opposition party, the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), were present.

Thirdly, despite the use of water canons to disperse the crowd, there were relatively few arrests and no reports of extreme violence during or after the demonstration. Many of the slogans and banners that were unfurled used Arabic terms and phrases such as 'Yahya al-Sha'ab' (Long Live the People) and expressed solidarity with the Arabs of Egypt. As the Egyptian crisis escalated, Malaysian authorities seemed more concerned about the need to evacuate an estimated 11,000 Malaysian students studying there, most of whom had been sent to Egypt by the Malaysian government to pursue religious studies. This suggested the extent of contact between the two countries, and may account for how and why Malaysians seemed well-informed of developments in Egypt.

Diverse reactions

The reaction of the Malaysian government has thus far been muted, with Prime Minister Najib Razak noting that it was and remains the right of the Egyptian people to decide on their own future and choose their respective leaders. The pro-government vernacular Malay press has taken a rather dim view of the developments across the Arab world, with the two most prominent pro-UMNO newspapers *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* describing the demonstrations as 'anti-government activities' that jeopardised the security and stability of Egypt.

The Malaysian opposition – notably the Islamists of PAS – have naturally taken the opposite view and have shown their support to the Egyptian protesters, particularly their compatriots in the Egyptian Islamist movement the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwanul Muslimin). Prominent Malaysian religious leaders like the former Mufti of Perlis Dr Asri Zainal Abidin have also waded into the fray, condemning pro-government Egyptian ulama who have been supporting the beleaguered Egyptian leader Mubarak.

The anti-Mubarak protests in Egypt – and the related protests in Jordan, Yemen and Tunisia – have therefore 'travelled' across the Muslim world and have had a knock-on effect in some countries like Malaysia. At this stage it is unlikely that the anti-Mubarak and anti-American protests in Malaysia will escalate any further (barring an escalation of violence in Cairo or elsewhere). But they serve as a convenient means to rally the opposition and to unite anti-government forces in a concerted effort to single out common opponents, in this case the US and its allies in the Arab world.

But this does not suggest a heightened mood of anti-Americanism in Malaysia. Malaysian Islamists' perception of the US has remained negative since 2001 and the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan the following year.

Prime Minister Najib has stated that Kuala Lumpur "would not allow anything (similar) to happen here". Significantly, the ruling coalition – as well as the mainstream media – has refrained from showing any unconditional support to the demonstrators in the Arab world.

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