MALAYSIA'S INTERNATIONAL ROLE POST-SEPTEMBER 11

Shamsul A. B. [*]

21 November 2002

The traumatic event of September 11 has had a tremendous impact not only within Malaysia but also upon its relationship with the rest of the world. Internally, it has redefined the relationship between the Malay-Muslim and the non-Muslim population. Arguably, a greater impact has been upon the relationship between the different factions within the Malay-Muslim community itself. In the international sphere, both in the eyes of the big powers as well as the Muslim countries, Malaysia has found a new 'positive' niche. This, in turn, has created further domestic consequences, some unexpected.

The immediate reaction of Malaysians to the event was one of extreme shock. The Malay-Muslims, both leaders and ordinary folks, and other Malaysians condemned vehemently the terrorist suicidal attack of the WTC and Pentagon. It was entirely a 'humanistic' response.

In a matter of weeks the reaction shifted to a 'political mode' when the US decided to conduct a military attack on Afghanistan to smoke out Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. When the attack was in progress the reaction shifted yet again to a 'humanistic mode', this time over the fate of innocent Afghan children and women caught in the military crossfire.

So, within a few weeks, the nature of Malaysians' reactions to the September 11 event became pluralized: some expressing a humanistic concern both to the victims and families of those in New York and Afghanistan; some, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, voicing political opposition to the bombing in Afghanistan based on rationalist arguments; some positioned themselves in between (sympathy for the victims in New York and Afghanistan and political opposition to the US bombing); and, at another level, there was indeed a difference in the political stance adopted by the government and the Islamic-oriented NGOs and opposition political parties.

The last rekindled an old and latent nationalist 'nation-of-intent' debate amongst the Malay-Muslim political parties on the issue of 'Islamic state.' It re-entered the public sphere when Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed declared that Malaysia is an 'Islamic state,' to which PAS, the Malay-Islamic party, responded that the declaration was a sham. Dr. Mahathir's 'Islamic state' claim was aimed at depoliticising and, indeed, negating any attempt, from sections of the Malay-Muslim community to label the US attack on Afghanistan as a universal attack on Muslims or Islam.

Thus the call for *jihad* against the US from such sections, in Mahathir's view, should be considered as unjustified, inappropriate, misplaced, and in fact an extremist-fundamentalist reaction. This did not prevent PAS and a few thousand supporters from staging a street demonstration in front of the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

From then on, the discourse in reaction to the September 11 events was no longer centred on the victims. It was about how to contain the extremist-fundamentalist Malaysian Muslims, though very small in number, from embarking on a campaign to conduct *jihad* against the 'evil America' that would have negative consequences beyond the numerical and political space they occupy.

The threat is on Malaysia's overall political stability based on the principle 'unity is not uniformity'. It is also about the struggle to win back supporters for UMNO (United Malays National Organization), the dominant Malay party in the national ruling coalition, and to gain Parti Islam supporters. The supporters are from the same pool of the large number of Malay-Muslim voters in the country.

As for the non-Muslims, the September 11 events have further alienated them from Parti Islam, and indeed any Malay-Muslim NGOs perceived as having a strong Islamic-orientation. Prior to that there was already a certain amount of unhappiness, for instance, amongst some Christians in Malaysia over the government's 'Islamization program' which they thought would erode religious freedom in the country. The declaration that Malaysia is an 'Islamic state' did not help to reduce their uneasy feelings and as a consequence Christian groups of various denominations in the country, for the first time ever, formed a coalition to advance jointly their cause.

Domestically, there was a clear divide between the Malay-Muslim and non-Muslim reactions over the September 11 events, hence creating a variety of consequences framed within the complex multi-ethnic and multi-religious framework of Malaysia. Amongst the Malay-Muslims it opened old wounds. Among the non-Muslims it increased unspoken suspicion. However, there has been a marked increase in open discussions between Muslims and non-Muslims on various aspects of Islam, in particular on the issue of 'Islamic state'.

It must be noted though that the interactions and debates were conducted in a rational and peaceful manner. The 'violent' face of Islam that the September 11 events demonstrated had, in some sense, made most non-Muslims in Malaysia begin to appreciate more than before the 'moderate' nature of Islam practiced in the country. Indeed, the discourse on the September 11events, and on topics related to Islam, has only increased the non-Muslims' understanding and consciousness about Islam which, in turn, could only have a positive impact on inter-ethnic relations.

Prior to the said events, Malaysia has been positioning itself as a champion of the South and the socio-economic model for other Islamic countries. But now it was suddenly being perceived by both friends and foes of the Afghan attack as representing the 'Islamic middle path' nation that could mediate between the extremes, especially in the present crisis. The fact that the Iranian leaders recently proposed that Malaysia should assume a mediator's role in the current international crisis has enhanced the Malaysian 'middle range' diplomatic role.

Since President's Bush's phone call to Dr. Mahathir in early October 2001, then Dr. Mahathir's letter to Bush shortly after that, and the Bush-Mahathir meeting in Shanghai before the APEC summit, Dr. Mahathir is now perceived as the 'shining' light of moderate Islam. Finally, in March 2002, Dr. Mahathir was invited to the White House to meet Bush and the 'American public,' so to speak, in person, after being snubbed publicly no less than by Vice-president Al Gore at the APEC meeting in Kuala Lumpur and 'vilified' by the US media, for more than a decade, both for his outspoken critique of a number of US policies and for Malaysia's bad 'human rights' record (read 'sacking of Anwar').

It was a historic meeting, at least for Dr. Mahathir. It provided him the much needed international endorsement. Locally, the implications went beyond the political. It is reported that Malaysia has begun to receive more visits from US investors. The cultural-educational programs expanded considerably. However, newly-introduced US immigration rules were not received favourably by Malaysians.

The icing on the cake was when Dr. Mahathir was invited to visit the Vatican. Together with a multi-religious delegation, he was received warmly by the Pope in May 2002. The visit received widespread publicity in Malaysia, the ASEAN region and especially, in the Muslim world. In fact, the news of his visit was aired by Al-Jazeera, the CNN of the Middle East. Many Malaysians and non-Malaysians saw the visit as an endorsement of Malaysia's increased international profile as a moderate Islamic nation.

Perhaps what is significant to observe is the more enduring impact of the current events felt at the individual level, namely, by every Muslim in Malaysia, who has, arguably, become more conscious about being a Muslim. They shall be constantly be reminded, by fellow Muslims and, especially others, through many different ways, some unpalatable, that they are Muslims and that they are different from the rest. As Muslims, they shall be reminded that they are 'special' but for the wrong reason. They are now identified as potential 'terrorists.' Such across the board, homogenized, negative classification or label, is beginning to be driven home with the new immigration rules introduced by the USA and Canada.

The new rule imposed by the US Department of Immigration that demands Muslim from the age of 18 to 45 to go through a 'terrorist screening' before allowed entry into the US has already had an impact beyond what it is meant for, especially, on 'being a Muslim' globally.

The question is what is going to stop other Western countries from adopting such negative attitude and policy towards Muslims in general and Malaysian Muslim in particular. Although the immediate Malaysian reactions are collective in nature, especially by the Malaysian government which has proclaimed Malaysia as a moderate 'Islamic state,' at the individual level concern is growing that being a Muslim is a great disadvantage.

It could, in turn, bring about two possible opposing consequences: on the one hand, some Malay Muslims may see it fit to de-emphasise their Muslim public image and, on the other, some may now be motivated to profile their Muslim image more strongly, either openly or silently. It is the latter that may worry the Malaysian government which is doing its best to fight against Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. It is not improbable that the opposition Parti Islam would take up this issue and turn it into political capital to attack the ruling party, especially UMNO, and demonstrate that its strategy to please the West by

declaring Malaysia a 'moderate Islamic state' has backfired and could be seen a dismal failure in international diplomacy.

Suddenly, in Malaysia, global and local Islam, after the September 11 events, have become so enmeshed that, no matter what the government tries to do, it is not possible for the two to be separated or disentangled. It has definitely redefined not only the socio-political scenario amongst the Muslims but also between Muslims and non-Muslims. In turn, because religion and ethnicity are intricately intertwined in Malaysian social life, the September 11 events, too, have had an impact on the overall 'ethnoscape' of the country.

---

[*] Dr. Shamsul is Professor of Social Anthropology and currently Director, Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia.