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FROM FOE TO FRIEND? EXPLAINING DR MAHATHIR'S SUPPORT ON WAR OF TERROR.

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INTRODUCTION

‘ The world is years of uncertainty, turmoil and surprise’¹

In the dawn of the 21st century, the list of shockers was joined by the unprecedented terrorist attacks of September 11 on the world leading superpower- The United States Of America. The loss of many innocent lives in the attacks of the World Trade Centre (WTC) and the Pentagon are probably the work of Osama bin Laden that have been firmly condemned by the world including by muslim leaders. The strikes on targets in Afghanistan have united almost all American internally. A global coalition to very different states has also been rafted together to fight against terrorism.

The whole focus of attention, not only in Malaysia but worldwide, began to shift from the horrific event of September 11 to the USA's foreign policy in dealing with terrorism and in particular, in attacking Afghanistan in order to smoke out Bin Laden and his supporters.

The reaction in Malaysia before and after ‘the war of terror ‘ shows some interesting qualitative differences. The relation Malaysia-US before ‘the war of terror’ was filled by the political rhetoric between the parties. The most obvious ‘break’ was created in 1997 after the Asian Economic Crisis, which all the economies of Southeast Asia were in a free-fall in term of stock market and currency values. Indonesia, Singapore and Korea took full measure to ‘cure’ their economies from the IMF in contrast with Malaysia which refuse IMF funding. Dr. Mahathir, the Prime Minister of Malaysia was perhaps the most vociferous in criticize the West on the crisis, particularly its impact in Malaysia.

¹ S Rajaratham- Singapore's foreign minister spoke in the seminar of Political Development Towards the year 2000 in 1979

However, since the September 11, there is the argument with great force that Malaysia is an ally in global fight against terrorism. Malaysia has granted U.S fighter to fly over the country on its way to conducting bombing raids in Afghanistan. U.S naval ships have docked in Malaysia ports since the operation attacking Afghanistan began. At the same time also, Malaysia has been providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan refugees, suffering as the result of the war.

In this paper, I will not put a lot emphasize on the event of September 11 nor the causes of the event. Instead, the paper will concentrate on the role of Mahathir as Prime Minister of Malaysia in support of the U.S war of Terror against Afghanistan in particular aim of understanding and evaluating the relation between Malaysia and U.S before and after the war of terror. How the reaction affect the internal politics in Malaysia.

MALAYSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: MALAYSIA-U.S RELATION

The method that states use to engage with other actors can be defined as ‘foreign policy’. The word ‘method’ has been used in the above definition because of the complex nature of the issues of foreign policy have come to assume. Furthermore, with the rise in the number of new and non-state actors, the conduct of foreign policy has been transformed from the simple inter-state relations to the complex –interdependence. Then, with the phenomenon of globalisation, no state is isolated from events that taken part in one parts of the world. These developments will without doubt have a tremendous impact in which state conduct their foreign relations.

Thus, the conduct of foreign policy whatever its style or form has always been about maximisation of benefits and minimisation of losses. The exercise of maximising benefits has often been couched in the concept of ‘national interest’. Thus, what is academically definition of national interest?

DEFINITION OF NATIONAL INTEREST

National interest is the basic concept in the foreign policy analysis. In order to see the distinction between the concept national interest in political analysis and political action, I try to look the definition by Rosenau J.N,

‘As an analytic tool, it is employed to describe, explain or evaluate the source or adequacy of a nation’s foreign policy. As an instrument of political action, it serves as a mean of justifying, denouncing or proposing policies. Both usages in other words, refer to what is best for a national security. They also share a tendency to confine the intended meaning to which is best for national society. Beyond these general consideration, however, the two uses of the concept have in common’ (1980:283)

While according to Frankel (1970:16), even this analytical or for empirical investigation. He advanced three reasons as to why this is the case. First, when an individual speaks of national interest, it is often impossible to decide which of these senses he is using the concept. Second, within each argument, by whomever it is made, there is no clear-cut distinction between these 2 uses of the concept. Finally, the increasingly blurred boundary between the domestic and international activities of the state adds to the confusion since the values pursued within these two areas of activity are not necessarily identical and often receive quite difference priorities. This divergent between the practical and theoretical use of the concept of ‘national interest’ is also reflect to the Malaysia Foreign Policy towards U.S particularly in Mahathir support on ‘war of terror’. The support led to criticism against the Malaysian foreign policy by observers both inside and outside the country. How do it so? . Before the paper goes further analyse on that matter, the following part will review on the relation of Malaysia-US during Dr. Mahathir administration.

United States had been identified as liberal democracies in which want to promote market economy. Americans also tend to like this perspective because it identifies the U.S as a benevolent force in the world politics and portrays its real and potential rivals as misguided and troublemakers. See Maersheime J (Febuari, 2002)

During the post cold war era and the downfall of the Soviet Union, many Americans concluded that democracy would spread across the globe and one belief that democratic America is a virtuous state. Ibid.

But, Dr. Mahathir cannot accept the liberal democracy by the West. For him, U.S is as the greed capitalist. He doesn't accept the new ideas and ideologies created the rich to give them over the poor.

“ Democracy, free market, a world without borders, liberalism, labour rights and child labour, etc have all been cooked up the rich countries and then, forced on the poor. Mahathir (2000)²

Dr. Mahathir also has emerged as one of the most forceful proponent of 'Asian values' as an alternative for neo-liberal agendas of Western Capitalism and the problem of Western democracy .See Mahathir (1995), Zakaria (1994), Loh Kok Wah (2002) For Mahathir Asian demonstrated a cultural predisposition towards stable leadership and continuity in government. He suggested too that Asian being communitarian and not individualist. In other words, he rejected the idea of Western Liberal democracy and he want to promote the 'Asian Value' for the Asian people in which concern on socio-economic well being instead of civil liberties and human right. See Khoo Boo Teik (2002)

Malaysia –US relation then become worst when the Asian Economic Crisis occurred. Mahathir blamed the crisis on the currency speculation by greedy North America and European investors.(NST, May 11, 2000)

Due to the Mahathir continuing on blaming the external factors particularly put blaming on the West, the U.S Congress condemn Mahathir for making inflammatory

² Mahathir's speech about Capitalism at Cairo University – June 20,2000
See : <http://www.globalist.com>

‘anti-American’ and ‘anti-Semitic’ statement and call him to apologize or resign. See Chin, James (1998)

The U.S also emphasize on the idea of individual right, thus, they strongly criticized on the sacking and arrest of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister. At the Asia Pacific economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November, Al-Gore standing for an absent President Clinton, bluntly praised the ‘brave Malaysian people’s call for ‘reformasi’’. See Felker, Greg (1998).

According to Abdullah Ahmad (2000),

“ The relationship has been wholly marked by preponderance of goodwill and cordiality until Al-Gore’s blunder as a result of bad advice by American Embassy”

Mahathir was frustrated on the remarks by Al-Gore. He said that the ties with the US are set to worse if Al-Gore win the presidency and it would difficult for Malaysia to have good relation with the US under Gore presidency. See FEER ,Nov 2000

The incident resulted in the cooling situation of the relation between Malaysia and the US. No high level political US representatives have been to Malaysia since that event. Dr. Mahathir also remains defiant in his position on the reform and handling the case of Anwar. By the way, he also concluded in his book entitled – ‘ Plea For New Begging’ by notes “The European are war alike and acquisitive”

However, after the attack of September 11, the political relation between Malaysia – U.S totally changed. There is no more rhetoric between the parties.

According to Shamsul (2001), Tay Simon (Oct. 2001)

“ The reaction in Malaysia, before and after the attack of Afghanistan showed some interesting qualitative differences compared to the relation since the controversial prosecution of Anwar Ibrahim.”

In fact, Dr. Mahathir said that Malaysia had a good relation with the U.S and wanted to be friendly with all the countries including Afghanistan . See NST- 13 Feb. 2002.

Mahathir said that Malaysia was not anti – American but disagreed with the manner in which the US against Afghanistan.

“ If we are anti- America, we wouldn’t support the attempt to hurt down terrorist” quoted Mahathir’s statement in NST – 5 May 2001.

So, here, it is interesting to analyse on the change of Mahathir’s response on the US as before and after the attack of September 11.

i) THE QUESTION OF SECURITY

National interest is the basic concept in the political analysis and political action particularly in foreign policy analysis. See Rosenau (1980: 283). When applying to the Mahathir’s support in the war of terror, the concept of national interest should be put under consideration. The foreign policy is design with the purpose of defending and promoting the country’s national security, economic and other vital interest. Malaysia’s foreign policy is no exception.

‘National interest’ as has been pointed out before, is those has broad objective, which in a sense all foreign policy is design to secure. According to Northedge (1968:77) national interest generally the preservation of the nation’s way of life, the projection on to the international scene of its value and aspiration and the enhancement of its welfare. Yet the ordering and interpretation of the interest in this situation are matters for argument.

In the late January 2002, U.S increased involvement in South East Asia (SEA). The Bush administration sent 2000 U.S troops to the Philippines and place them in the South of archipelago to assist in hostage rescue and counter insurgency operation. According to Gershman (2002: 153), this moves indicated that the opening of second front in U.S’s War Of Terror. It can be understandable after all base on the arrested of dozens of alleged Al- Qaeda operation in Singapore, Malaysia and Philippine. It is also noted that the taliban in Afghanistan having been routed in SEA; as the radical groups such as Jemaah Islamiah (JI), Abu Sayyaf Philippines and the Kumpulan Mujahideen in Malaysia.

Back to Malaysia, it was stated in the USA Today of 30 January 2002 report as quoting the FBI as describing Malaysia as ‘ one of the primary operational launch pads’

for the September 11 terrorists attack as –“ Preparation for the September 11 attacks on the U.S took place in Kuala Lumpur” and U.S leaders, “ increasing see Malaysia as a key front in the war on terrorism”.

In the Washington Post of Febuary, 1, 2002 has intensified the international pressure on Malaysia, when it quoted FBI Director, Robert Mueller, himself saying that FBI investigators believe the September 11 terror attack on New York and Pentagon were planned in part by Al- Qaeda operation in Malaysia.

The Washington Post report under the heading ‘ FBI says Malaysia was site of September 11 Planning’

“ FBI Director, Robert S. Mueller 111 said yesterday that investigators believe the September 11 terror attacks were planned in part by Al- Qaeda operation in Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim nation whose connection to the plot has only recently emerged”

At first, Dr. Mahathir and his cabinet ministers seriously denied the country linking to the September 11 as was reported in the international media. He admitted that extremist group exist in Malaysia, but their attack just at ‘us’ and ‘we can take care of them.’ See NST (20 December 2001)

But, when Mahathir met with the U.S president- Bush in the APEC meeting in China, he agreed that some people had a link with Al- Qaeda .

“ ...at that time we were not very certain, but we have discovered that some of these people who are were active, who planned to overthrow the government Eventually go Afghanistan, where they did meet with the Al-Qaeda”

It is in the national interest that the international credibility gap afflicting Malaysia, which had suddenly, surfaced concerning Al-Qaeda operative and links in the country should be resolved.

As according to Northedge (1968:35), in order to secure the international cooperation, the implementation of foreign policy must always in continuous attempt with one's own position and modified as far as may be necessary.

Most of Muslim leaders are in dilemmas either looking good to the international community and acting in according with the highest of the international community or conciliating domestic matter. As Farish Nor (2001), notes that many government in the Muslim world are already in a state of crisis facing enormous problems with the huge credibility deficit. In this situation, the option bypassing or overriding the demands of the local muslim community is simply not workable.

According to Leigh M (ibid) also,

‘ Mahathir has to juggle both the domestic and the international constituency and risks losing one if he identified whole hearted with the other. ’

It is very hard for the Muslim government in general and Mahathir in particular, in facing the situation. In fact, he make said in the New Straits Times(NST)- 8 October 2001, that he condemns the attack in Afghanistan on the grounds that it does not provide us with a solution to the problem of terrorism itself, but also did so out sympathy for the people of Afghanistan who are of course fellow muslim.

This also can explain why the Malaysian government has taken a new step engaging with the Islamic Opposition and talking about an Islamic State. For Mahathir, Malaysia is already an Islamic state under his own secular modern administration. That's why UMNO does not see the Islamic state as a goal to be achieved. Farish Nor (Dec. 2001)

Dr. Mahathir also in the meeting of Organization Islamic Conference (OIC) had come out his own definition of terrorism. For him all forms terrorism including act perpetuated by Jews, Christian, Hindus, radicals, secularist, etc are targeted, not just those who confess Islam. He also toured most of Muslim countries like Morocco, Libya and Bahrin, caling for a united Islamic front against Israel. This would drastically reduce the muslim protest everywhere.

For U.S, the act of Mahathir as balancing support between U.S and his base of support at home that among the largely Islamic Malay majority. See Robert (2002)

ii) ECONOMIC NATIONALISM

During the Asian economic crisis, Malaysia rejected the approach by the IMF in bringing Malaysia out of the crisis. This approach basically called for tightening the country's monetary policy and implementing some austerity measure.

Mahathir on the other hand adopted a nationalist outlook for the crisis with a strong anti IMF stance. This leader believes the way out is by loosening monetary policy, lowering interest rates and expanding the money supply. By this way, Mahathir blame currency speculators for the Malaysian economic crisis.

“ Greed. An incensement for money and instant material gain has impoverished Asia” Mahathir (1999:7)

Thus, clearly his attempt to blame and also consolidate his power domestically at a time of uncertainty, cause him to be isolate from key actors and institution in the world economic. For him, taking the above measures was in the nation's best interest this had to be utmost priority.

Even though he rejected the economic assistance from IMF, it did not mean that Mahathir and his government anti market. According to Kukreja (1999), the government's outlook was not 'anti market as much as it was strong believe in 'managing' market forces to national interest. For Balaam (1996:26-34) also, such an outlook and approach to the market is one of the distinguishing aspect of economic nationalism. Why does so?

During the administration of Mahathir, he had putting his idea into practice, transforming Malaysia from an exporter of rubber and tin in an Asian economic tiger producing electronic equipment, steel and cars.

He also had a major plan to establish Malaysian as a developed society in 2020. The major part of the project was by building, which has known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) outside the national capital. The government hopes that by building major global companies, the MSC would become a major International information technology centre. It also builds the world's first 'smart cities' along the MSC. Putrajaya,

which is to become the nation's new administrative capital, will highlight the concept of 'electronic government'.

This government's ambition will obviously depend on the great deal of financial and technology input from private investors and multi national corporations. As Mahathir himself notes,

" We have been trying to lure many foreign companies tothe MSC will tax breaks and other incentives. We are often offering foreign corporations privileges and more favourable starting conditions than our own local corporation" (1999:124)

Thus, when the event September 11 in which US need support from other countries, Mahathir did not want to lost the opportunity to renew business relationship with the U.S. According to Roberts J (2002):

" During Mahathir's visit with the help of Congressman and Dallas businessman Pete sessions, a confidant of Bush, launched a congressional lobby group – the Malaysian Trade, security and Economic Cooperation Caucus"

Ernest Baner as president of the U.S-ASEAN Business Council notes in the New Straits Times

" The Caucus is a good thing because the Anwar issue had significantly coloured understanding of Malaysia. For some time, it had been a single-issue country, despite our strong business and security relation. People may have significant concern about Anwar, but that's only part of the broader relationship"

In fact, the U.S is Malaysia's largest market with export to the U.S totalling \$US17.9 billion last year. Import from U.S also totalled \$11.8 billion making the U.S largest trading partner. The US is also Malaysia's largest source of direct foreign investment³

Hence, although it may obvious that Mahathir rhetoric towards the West particularly U.S on the blaming for the causes of financial crisis led to crack on the relation Malaysia-U.S. However, it would misleading to label the Malaysian government as 'anti-market' since the project of MSC encourage for the foreign investment. In fact,

³ Speech by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia at the Asia Society California Centre on September 17, 1998.

the step chosen by the Mahathir and his government prove that the government chose the right decision and able to strengthen the Malaysian economy.

Thus, it is important to say that Mahathir's response to the financial crisis and war of terror can be understood by relevance to the economic nationalism and the role-play in shaping how nation may act in our highly integrated world economic.

iii) MAHATHIR'S PERSONALITIES.

Mahathir is the Malaysian Prime Minister, who has very well known as the Asia longest serving leaders. Before the economic crisis, in the Asiaweek (July 5 1996), he was the 4th powerful leader in Asia , behind Suharto (President of Indonesia), Jiang Zemin of China and Lee Teng Hui of Taiwan. After the crisis, he became very popular and became controversial leader due rejected the IMF approach in Malaysia.

He also plays a major role in ensuring steady economic growth over the most last decades. He had transformed a largely rural Malay populace in an urban community with the sizeable representation in the profession, commerce and industry. I believed the credit should given to him as he responsible in making the decision about the economic in which at the end benefited to the people. When Malaysia petroleum revenue began to decline in early eighties, he pushed for an industrialisation programme aimed at strengthening the local manufacturing base. He trimmed down a bloated bureaucracy in the midst of the 1980-86 economic recession. When the Asian economic crisis happened in 1997-1999, he imposed currency controls and peg Malaysian ringgit. It helped to steady the ringgit, stem the currency outflow and create a stable environment for business and investments.

Besides his success in domestic politics, Mahathir greatest achievement perhaps in the international affairs. On behalf of the third world, the South, small countries and developing countries, Mahathir spoke against the powerful, commercial and financial centres of the world. See Khoo Boo Teik (1995:57)

Mahathir's rhetoric was often very sharp and merciless particularly when it comes to defend the interest of the country and third world in general. He has a passion to

uphold the idea of sovereignty of the state and champion of non-involvement in another country's affair and always critical of Western 'lesson givers'. See Godement (1999)

Mahathir is also a champion of Asian Values and identities. In his book 'A New Deal', he said that

".....each country in Asia has the right to develop in its own mould, based on its own unique identity and history."

Ever accusing the developed western nation of practising economic colonisation, he wrote down, " the Asian countries were not freed from European and later Japanese, subjugation only to surrender their economic freedom to the new masters borderless capitalism...each Asian nation has the right and should have the opportunity to chose its path of development, the way in which it higher to participate in the global economic game."

However, it is necessary to see beyond Mahathir's rhetoric on his anti-Westernism. Mahathir's language against the West just a language of anger. His language sometimes sounded by diplomatic standards, it was not the anti-imperialist language of radical Asian, African or Latin America. He was only against 'imperialism' as protectionism but would hardly have believed of imperialism in the form of 'foreign investment'. See Khoo Boo Teik (1995:94)

At the United Nation in 1992, the voice of an emerging spokesman of the Third World could be heard: 'the age of empires and imperial pores is practically over. But the world has not yet become a better place for previously colonized. There are many reasons for this and among them is the banding together of the rich nations in order to maintain economics dominance, which some say is actually a form of imperialism" *ibid*: 61

According to Murray Hiebert from Far Eastern Review, even Mahathir talks and criticizes a lot what is going on the west particularly U.S but on the other hand, he is a friend of foreign business and foreifn investors. In fact, according to him, Mahathir did not publicize it but he is friendly despite his rhetoric⁴

Based on the analysis on his own personality as the main political actor of Malaysia, it should not come as surprise that Mahathir support the U.S's war of terror.

⁴ An interviewed in the online news Hour with Jim Le Hver – See http://www.pbs.org/newshours/bb/asia/July-dec99/malaysia_11.29.html

According to Ronald De Wayne Palmer as former U.S ambassador in Malaysia notes that,

“ Rhetoric is one thing. Money, investments, having important and potent friend is something else’⁵

CONCLUSION

Mahathir’s vision for Malaysian is absolutely for gearing the nation to higher level of domestic and international performance. Mahathir’s vision can be summarized as according to Nathan K.S (1995:234) ;

“ to galvanize public support for making Malaysia a fully developed country in 18 years, thus giving Malaysia a reasonable time rame and forward-looking strategy to achieve this target”

Thus, on the Mahathir’s support on war of terror base on my analysis more inclined towards preserve the national security. Like other southeast Asia leaders, he also aware that its success of national survival are particularly depends on his support to the U.S’s War Of Terror by which U.S asked the international community to take side on this war.

The Malaysia government and Dr. Mahathir in particularly, response to it, is not very surprising. What all Mahathir administration has held in common is the perception of the importance of diplomacy and international representation as a means towards the achievement of national security for Malaysia.

The administration of Mahathir in Malaysia since 1981 has promoted an Islamic image of the country over and beyond any of its predecessors. Significantly, this can been explained by different international contexts in which Malaysia state has found itself over almost 44 years of its independence. However, due to the circumstances of internal political influx, the engagement of a religious character within foreign policy has also been virtually necessitated.

⁵ ibid

In turn, the enhance atmosphere on the Islamic debate and the lost of support from the Malay Muslim, have worked towards the shaping of even greater pressures on the government perceptions and attitudes towards international relations.

In response to the War of Terror, Dr Mahathir was declared Malaysia as an Islamic and Moderate State and also arrested most of the extremist into the ISA.

It is extremely difficult for the Malaysia government to look as if it is not sympathy or in support of Muslim in other countries around the world. Thus, besides supporting on the U.S - ; ‘ *our stand quite simple. That is we do not agree with the act of terror, do not agree with the terrorist in whatever struggle*’ Pereira, B (October 22,2001) and on the strikes of Afghanistan, as Mahathir-‘*we also do not agree with the practice of declaring war on a country to eradicate terrorism and terrorist*’ ibid

However, even after all, it shows that most of the Dr Mahathir response to the US ‘War Of Terror’ base on the national interest or national security, but, since Mahathir had arrested most of the PAS (the opposition party) members by claiming them linking to September 11, it should be treat carefully. As according to Rosenau(1980: 283), “ *not only do political actors tend to perceive and discuss their goal in terms of national interest, but they are also inclined to claim that their goals are national interest*”

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