

Malaysian opposition leaders spurn Mahathir's olive branch

by Sophie Tanapura

The Malaysian opposition to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohammad Mahathir, with the backing of the liberal press in Great Britain and the United States, has refused offers of compromise from Mahathir. For the last year, Mahathir has managed to hold on to power, despite defections from the ruling party coalition and operations against the government coming from the same Theology of Liberation networks that have been operating in Singapore and the Philippines.

In November, Mahathir had been working for unity talks between the Johore Barisan, Malaysia's ruling coalition of parties, and opposition leader Musa Hitam, a former deputy prime minister under Mahathir who went into the opposition 18 months ago. But the opposition, led by Musa, has refused to talk. In a strategy of chaos, Musa and others have indicated that they will resign their parliamentary seats, provoking a series of unnecessary by-elections.

One such Member of Parliament, Tawfik Tun Dr. Ismail, stated unabashedly that the recent peace offer by Mahathir's United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the most powerful party in the Barisan coalition, has "not affected our plans. . . . We will hold a meeting next month to plan our strategies and to draw up a list of MPs and state assemblymen in Johore [Musa's stronghold] who will take turns resigning to seek re-election. Elected representatives supporting us in other states will also step down," according to the pro-opposition newspaper *The Star* Nov. 5.

The Mahathir peace offer includes extraordinary initiatives taken by UMNO at its Oct. 27-30 General Assembly, to open its doors to all Malays, even those responsible for challenging in court the legality of the previous 1987 General Assembly, which had resulted in the court-ordered de-registration of their party. Even opposition leaders challenging Prime Minister Mahathir would be permitted to rejoin. The Assembly's thinking was that, with 1 million new members recruited over the past few months, they were in a position of strength sufficient to extend the olive branch in the interest of Malay unity to their opponents. The prime minister himself, during his closing remarks at the General Assembly, dropped the biggest bombshell when he announced, "As we all want unity, and serious efforts must be made toward achieving this objective, I invite Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah [former trade and industry minister seeking to replace Mahathir as prime minister] and Datuk Musa Hitam to become

members of the cabinet as ministers without portfolio."

Typical of the response within UMNO to this offer, were the comments made by UMNO Vice-President Datuk Wan Mokhtar Ahmad: "Dr. Mahathir's decision was made in the footsteps of the Prophet Mohammad, who pardoned those who condemned him. This is the Islamic way. I am very happy that the prime minister has proven once again that he is successful in getting Malays together."

British war against Malay unity

"Malay Unity" has been the key factor in the development of the country since UMNO was formed in 1946 and the Alliance was created in the first cooperative elections between the races during the 1952 municipal elections. During this period, which coincided with a communist-led, Pol Pot-style bloody insurrection, the British actively attempted to sabotage the existence of a single united Malay community led by UMNO. According to the late T.H. Tan, one of the three participants in the first mission to England to seek independence, Britain was especially worried that then flourishing cooperation between UMNO and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), in the form of the Alliance, would spread to Singapore. They had no intention of giving Singapore independence along with the mainland.

Thus, the British chose to promote the UMNO split-off parties, ironically named the Independence for Malaya Party and Party Negara (National Party), to wreck both internal Malay unity and the Alliance. British divide-and-rule tactics became so notorious that the British Commissioner General at the time, Malcolm MacDonald, had to officially deny it. Today it is widely and correctly perceived that there is no way that national racial harmony and economic stability can be maintained with a divided Malay community.

The UMNO strategy

It is a relevant question, whether inviting the opposition back into the party and even into the cabinet will not give them the opportunity to organize the destruction of UMNO from within. However, Mahathir's approach so far has been to identify opposition members for what they are, thus creating a controlled environment around them within the party.

For example, at the UMNO General Assembly, Mahathir stated: "This group got its idea from the Philippines. They

even use the same color for their shirts as members of the Laban Party. Do we get inspiration from an incident in a foreign country?" referring to the "people's power" ouster of Ferdinand Marcos. UMNO Deputy President Ghafar Baba, speaking before the joint session of UMNO Youth and Wanita (women's division) stated equally clearly: "Unfortunately, there are people with a negative attitude who want to topple the government, because they want to grab power by destroying a growing country. Such tactics were also used by the Communist Party of Malay. Before grabbing power, they plotted first to destroy the economy."

Ghafar's comments were especially relevant, given the recent defamatory speech by Musa to the Hong Kong Foreign

Correspondents Club, where he depicted Malaysia's Barisan Nasional coalition as weak and falling apart, and Mahathir as only holding onto power through dictatorial means. The foreign press lent a sympathetic ear, as Musa knew they would.

But at home, Malays were appalled at the speech; some even labeled it traitorous. Many felt it could only have a negative effect on foreign investment in Malaysia. Mahathir, however, during his UMNO General Assembly address, put the cards on the table: "The aim of these foreign media and these groups is to undermine the stability and development of Malaysia. . . . Thus, whoever threatens stability and causes problems to the nation receives their support. In this, the

Senator Moynihan joins the opposition

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), the self-proclaimed anti-LaRouche spokesman who has called for an end to party primaries in the United States, to ensure that no more LaRouche supporters could win, has recently surfaced supporting Malaysia's jailed "human rights" activist Karpol Singh, who was arrested in October 1987 with about 100 others under Malaysia's Internal Security Act (ISA), for inciting racial tension. The most recent issue of the opposition monthly *Aliran* featured an Aug. 10 letter of support for Karpol Singh signed by Senator Moynihan, along with Rep. Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio), and Rep. James Jeffords (R-Vt.). The letter claimed that Singh "is a respected human rights lawyer" and should be freed to "permit him to return to his human rights activities without interference."

Joining Moynihan is AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, whose letter was featured in the previous issue of *Aliran* supporting former ISA detainee Dr. V. David. David, who is both an opposition member of Parliament and general secretary of the Transport Workers Union (MTUC), has been the point man for the AFL-CIO in its efforts to destabilize Malaysia, through the threatened withdrawal of special trade privileges under the Generalized System of Preferences. GSP privileges permit developing countries to pay reduced tariffs for their exports to the United States. The loss of GSP benefits would jeopardize at least 75,000 Malaysian jobs and over 11% of Malaysia's exports to America. The AFL-CIO has filed a petition with the U.S. government to end these privileges, due to the alleged violation of the human rights of Malaysian workers.

Though Kirkland claims in his letter to David that their intention is "not to cause Malaysia to lose its GSP privileges," that is exactly what he has told the U.S. government to do. Kirkland himself admits that this "is a paradox that some find difficult to understand."

It is ironic that in light of the AFL-CIO's efforts to unleash havoc in Malaysia, its representatives are protesting the withdrawal of the very same benefits from Israel, for human rights violations. No less an expert on human rights than AFL-CIO International Affairs Committee chairman and president of the American Federation of Teachers Albert Shanker recently testified before a Washington, D.C. interagency panel investigating whether six nations—Malaysia, Haiti, Burma, Liberia, and Israel—should have their special trade benefits revoked. Israel was placed on the list as a result of charges filed by the Arab-American Anti-Discriminatory Committee, citing violations against the rights of Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Over 300 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli troops during the past year's uprising. At the hearings, Shanker expressed his outrage that Israel should be put "in the same category" as the other five nations.

Mahathir hits back

Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, in a speech before the U.N. General Assembly last September, implicitly attacked the hypocrisy of the likes of Moynihan and the AFL-CIO leaders. "It would be tragic," he said, "if a working, prosperous nation is destroyed because some self-appointed democrat felt it was not democratic enough. This holier-than-thou attitude is out of tune with modern mores. . . . As with fanatical religious proselytizers, the so-called champions of democracy are not adverse to using undemocratic and coercive means to force their particular brand of democracy on the weak and poor. Refusal to comply results in all kinds of economic and political arm-twisting."

UMNO breakaway group has been used by the foreign media to undermine Malaysia's development. But members of this group willingly allowed themselves to be used. It is better for them if anarchy reigned on Malaysia and the country did not progress, as long as they obtained the foreign support to promote their interests."

It seems clear that the UMNO strategy has been to defeat the opposition, then provide them the opportunity for an escape route: reconciliation. Will it work? So far Musa has turned down the cabinet offer, Razaleigh has made no formal decision, and prominent opposition backer Tunku Abdul

The opposition, charged Prime Minister Mahathir, "has been used by the foreign media to undermine Malaysia's development. . . . It is better for them if anarchy reigned on Malaysia and the country did not progress, as long as they obtained the foreign support to promote their interests." Still, Mahathir has offered to bring opposition leaders into his cabinet, in the national interest.

Rahman has described the offer as adding insult to injury. Reports are continuing to circulate that the Chinese-based opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), whose leader has been under detention for the past year, is about to form a coalition with the disgruntled Malay opposition. This, in fact, has been publicly recommended by the Tunku. Because of the widespread recognition among the ethnic Malays that the DAP is primarily committed to undermining the country's Malay leadership, it is not likely that a DAP-Musa-Razaleigh coalition could gain acceptance by Malays.

However, it would strengthen the DAP and serve to divide the Chinese community which plays a crucial role in the Barisan Nasional government alliance. Therefore, perhaps the most important next step to ensure stability in Malaysia, is to strengthen UMNO-MCA cooperation. Strains within this relationship have recently surfaced when the MCA and the Barisan Nasional. Resolution of these problems will be primarily determined through the ability of the coalition government to work out racially harmonious plans for economic development in the post-1990 period, particularly the development of rural Malaysia.

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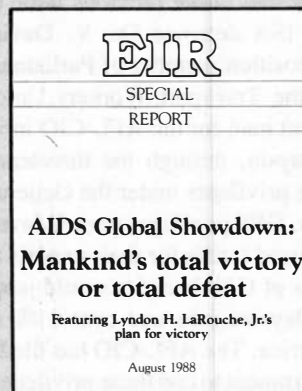
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