

The September 11 mega-terrorism and its impact on Malaysia

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The September 11 mega-terrorist attack on the United States was an unprecedented tragedy of untold proportion with global ramifications. Two hijacked American passenger planes rammed into the World Trade Centre in New York immediately turning it into an inferno and in no time, reducing it to rubble, and causing an incredible number of deaths. At around the same time, across in Washington, another hijacked American plane took a direct hit at the Pentagon, the very nerve- centre of United States defense and security establishment, causing widespread damage and killing hundreds of military as well as civilian personnel on the ground and all the passengers and crew members. A fourth hijacked passenger plane was supposedly on its way to attack the White House or Congress when it crashed in Pennsylvania killing everyone on board.

This whole episode was without doubt a most chilling and defiant assault ever on the United States. It was an extra-ordinary incident by any standard. But certainly this was not an extra-ordinary incident merely due to the large number of deaths of innocent people caused by the attack, now estimated at over 3,000 people from nearly eighty countries because more people die in traffic accidents in Japan or are murdered in the streets of America every year. It may even be distasteful to contemplate this kind of comparison. Nor was this incident intensely tragic just because so many people were killed within a span of an hour or so because the Atom-bomb dropped in Hiroshima, for example, exterminated many more people in just one instance than this September 11 attack. The recent incident was also not any special just because of the gruesome manner its victims met their fate. There have been other probably more horrific massacres committed elsewhere in the world in the not-too-distant past. Whether

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it was in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Kosovo, Palestine or Rwanda, the mass massacres that have been committed were no less horrifying. Yet, the September 11 tragedy was different from any other such tragedy on at least two grounds.

First, the dramatic moments of the tragedy that were captured and shown almost live, worldwide, and watched in disbelief and horror everywhere created a far-reaching global impact. The scene of the fire engulfing the World Trade Centre buildings with helpless victims jumping to their deaths and the once mighty twin towers turning to ruins in such a horrific manner and within a short space of time, was awfully gruesome. The fact that it was the heart of the United States that was hit hard also debunked the myth of American invincibility. This was raw drama without comparison.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, it was the immediate chain of reactions that this incident generated with ramifications on every corner of the earth, Malaysia included, that really made the September 11 tragedy unlike unto any other. For a country which has traditionally maintained close and cordial relations with the United States, but which also has a substantial and sensitive Islamic constituency, Malaysia's predicaments could not have been more intense and difficult in dealing with this incident and its aftermath.

In order to be able to appreciate the impact of the September 11 incident on Malaysia and the world, we have to understand how it was perceived, both by America and the world. That this incident constituted an abominable act of terror was universally agreed and condemned by all, the United States and the rest of the world, the Muslims and the Non-Muslims. Where there was a great deal of uneasiness and anxiety among the Muslims was the way Islam was singled out as its main source. The mass media, American media in particular and especially the CNN, almost immediately, even before any credible evidence was gathered had conveniently attributed the blame to Islamic fundamentalism. Consciously or unconsciously, both the U.S. government and the media seemed to have drawn this line which had the effect of portraying Islam as the enemy and the attack on America as an attack on Western civilization itself. The

choice of words to describe the American war on terror, such as “crusade” carried unpleasant religious connotations which immediately placed the Muslims on the defensive. The backlashes against the Muslims in the United States, Europe and Australia were immediate and severe. In the U.S. massive arrests of Muslims, mainly of Middle Eastern background were made on the ground that they were all legitimate suspects, disregarding their constitutional rights under the Fourth Amendment.

The American government rhetoric initially did little to assuage the fears of Muslims all over the world, including those in Malaysia, that the U.S. had a hidden agenda and was just using this episode as a pretext to discredit Islam. In Italy, its Prime Minister, in an attempt to show his country’s solidarity with the United States, publicly claimed that Christianity was superior to Islam, causing intense diplomatic protests over his remarks. It was only later, probably after the damage had already been done, that President Bush came out strongly to emphasize that the war against terrorism was not a war against Islam and that the religious rights of Muslims in the United States would be respected. The President even visited a local mosque to demonstrate his goodwill toward Islam. The U.S. too became more focussed in singling out chief suspect, Osama Mohamad Binladen and his Al-Qaeda network. But all the same, given the context in which this whole drama had evolved, Muslims all over the world agonized over what they perceived as an attempt to put Islam on trial and make it accountable for the actions of terrorists who may be only remotely connected to the religion. Thus, it is not surprising that many among them even chose to believe the demented version of the event as a Jewish conspiracy!

The attempt to link the September 11 terrorist act to Islam, though eventually modified, had created a serious credibility gap for the United States among the Muslims and this was what continued to feed Muslim skepticism over American policies and actions. The refusal by the United States to want to look into the possible causes of the terrorist act was seen by many Muslims as not only being indicative of an arrogant attitude but also one which justified their suspicion that the United States was only interested in pursuing its own narrow agenda regardless of other people’s views and sensibilities. Thus, when Osama Binladen and his

Al-Qaeda network were blamed for the attack, many were not convinced of their guilt and demanded concrete evidence, which again for unexplained reasons, was never shown except to a very select audience, including Pakistan's military dictator, Musharraf. Although the Americans claimed that they had incontrovertible proof of Binladen's involvement in the September 11 attack, this was never made public. A video-tape which allegedly shows Binladen making incriminating remarks about his role released by the United States, after the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is not only far from convincing but also lacks legal credence, thus raising more questions than answers.

Malaysia was affected by this crisis in numerous ways and responded to it and the events that ensued accordingly. The Government was quick to condemn the September 11 incident as an unacceptable act of terror and Prime Minister Mahathir was among the first of the world's leaders to extend Malaysia's condolences to the government and the people of the United States. It was highlighted that there were Malaysians too among the victims of the WTC tragedy. Among the ordinary people, across the board, there was also universal condemnation of the incident. Nevertheless when Islam was identified as the source of the terror, the latent tensions and contradictions that characterized Malaysian plural society, threatened to spill over to the surface. The Muslims, in particular, became most involved especially because the name of Islam was invoked.

When the U.S. was planning an attack on Afghanistan and other Muslim countries in retaliation, Muslim street opinion was unsympathetic and even hostile to the United States. Mahathir, used this opportunity to skillfully demonstrate his independence of mind by unequivocally condemning terrorism on the one hand while also arguing that it is its causes that should also be addressed and overcome rather than just trying to eliminate its symptoms. This line of argument, though unpopular with the Bush Administration, struck an accord with the mainstream Muslim view that the Middle East crisis had to be resolved if terrorism was to be eliminated. Many people had also been arguing that a linkage between the September 11 attack and the blatant atrocities committed by the Israeli soldiers on innocent Palestinians in

occupied land could not be dismissed. The excessive use of force by the Israelis had been flagrantly provocative. The use of F-16 fighter jets, tanks and missiles by the Israeli military against a civilian population protesting against its illegitimate occupation was by any moral standard disproportionate and unacceptable and was probably the direct cause of the attack on America since the United States is the principal supporter of Israel, not only through its annual U.S.\$3 billion grants but also through its constant use of its veto power in the United Nations Security Council to block any resolution which seeks to condemn Israeli for its transgression against the Palestinian people.

When the U.S. threatened to attack Afghanistan to flush out the Al-Qaeda terrorists and punish the Taliban regime for harbouring them, Mahathir criticized the move on humanitarian grounds arguing that it would lead to unnecessary and unacceptable civilian casualties, thus gaining approval at home and abroad especially among the Muslims for his courage to speak up against the United States. But Mahathir was also critical of the Taliban's brand of Islamic fundamentalism which he suggested was being adopted by his own adversary at home, the Islamic party, PAS. The Taliban's defeat and with it, the demise of its brand of Islam made Mahathir's moderate and pragmatic approach to Islam as a much more viable and preferred alternative. Either way Mahathir won.

The crisis was also a consolation to Mahathir in other ways. The sacking, detention, trial and later conviction of his former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, had been severely criticized as a travesty of justice which made a mockery of the judicial system in Malaysia. This had almost caused his downfall and that of UMNO in the 1999 general elections. The West, especially the United States, had also been blatant in their criticism of Malaysia and Mahathir for having draconian laws, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and for having arbitrarily detained people without trial. The Malaysian media too had always been criticized for being heavily bias in favour of the government. But what happened in the United States following the September 11 incident, with the rise of hate crimes against the Muslims; the unashamed display of media patriotism; arbitrary arrests and detention; allegations of torture

while under detention; the setting up of a military court to try non-Americans for terrorism; the failure of the United States to publicly produce legally acceptable evidence of Binladen's alleged guilt and the devastation caused by American bombing of Aghanistan, especially of civilians, made Mahathir's so-called political sins appear so mild and insignificant.

Prior to the September 11 incident, whatever its shortcomings, the United States was generally seen by Malaysians as a model state. American values were very highly regarded. Malaysian civil society looked up to the United States for support and inspiration. American education was considered second to none and since the 1970s tens of thousands of Malaysians have graduated from American universities. American capital was much solicited in Malaysia. American companies asserted a major presence in Malaysia and the lives of hundreds of thousands of Malaysians were directly and indirectly dependent on them. A large number of Malaysians lived and worked in the United States. The United States too was Malaysia's biggest trading partner for a good many years. The influence of American media in Malaysia too was overwhelming. There clearly were reciprocal interests shared by the two countries.

In the post-September 11 period, especially after the United States launched its war on terror, the ugly side of America was inevitably exposed. In its rage, the United States had taken draconian steps at home and abroad to fight terrorism. Among these was the introduction of drastic limitations on civil liberties. Discrimination based on ethnicity is now more evident and the rise of intolerance seems more noticeable now. Civil society in the United States suffered a set-back as the State became obsessed with its role to combat terrorism. The American agenda for democracy also took a step backward as the United States sought new allies to fight terrorism and in the process bestowed legitimacy to some of the most corrupt and undemocratic regimes in the world as long as they backed America. The exact scale of the destruction that the assault on Afghanistan had caused may not be known for some time yet except for an estimated several thousand civilian deaths. The continued harsh Israeli military transgression against civilians and the democratically- elected Palestinian Authority in occupied West Bank and Gaza, with tacit American blessing, in the name of stamping out terror, if

anything has only reinforced the prevailing view among the Muslims that it was the direct American support of Israeli aggression that created the problem in the first place. It is difficult to imagine that, against the backdrop of the foregoing developments, the United States will continue to be seen as the custodian of freedom, democracy and civil society, unless it changes its Middle East policies.

Paradoxically, the September 11 crisis consolidated Mahathir's position in Malaysia in a way that was perhaps unimaginable a couple of months ago. For one thing, the United Opposition, which brought together the various opposition political parties to take on Mahathir's National Front, to provide an alternative political coalition, had been severely undermined when the Democratic Action Party (DAP) decided to pull out of the Front in protest over the Islamic State issue advocated by PAS. The call by the *Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (PUM)* [The Ulama Association of Malaysia], to boycott American goods and services, in protest of American war atrocities in Afghanistan, was flatly rejected by Mahathir who argued against the wisdom of such an action. Perhaps, as an astute politician, Mahathir understands that just as pragmatism has contributed to Malaysia's political stability and impressive economic development for the last few decades, it has to continue to be guided by the same guiding principles to sustain its growth. The goodwill and support of the United States still matter a lot to Malaysia and Malaysians in all kinds of ways. It seems very unlikely that the traditional bonds between the peoples of the two countries that have taken so long to develop are about to be disrupted anytime soon, whatever the odds.