



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 124 | July 21, 2011

Malaysia's Political Awakening: A Call for US Leadership

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John R. Malott, former US Ambassador to Malaysia, writes that “Now the world’s democracies need to stand on the right side of Malaysia’s future. The United States has a multitude of interests in Malaysia, one of which is to help strengthen democracy and the rule of law.”

A Malaysian recently wrote to me, “Most Americans don’t know or even care where Malaysia is.” Even among the so-called foreign policy elite, little attention is paid to Malaysia. There are few American academics who specialize in domestic Malaysian politics, and except for hosting visits by senior Malaysian leaders, think tanks and universities hold few Malaysia-themed programs. US newspaper and magazine reports are few, with most articles focusing on tourism and the delights of Malaysian cuisine. As a result, there is a tendency among Americans to hold an idealized image of Malaysia as a successful multiracial and multi-religious paradise, an Asian economic dynamo, and a stable and moderate Muslim democracy. As a result of this deficit of informed analysis of Malaysian politics, there has been a failure to notice the internal political changes unfolding within Malaysia over the past few years. The reality today, as one Australian expert puts it, is that the situation is the “most fluid and dangerous” in Malaysia’s history.

The Events of July 9 – A Date for the History Books

Because of this attention shortfall, the events of July 9, 2011 came as a surprise. On that day, tens of thousands of Malaysians—who have been ranked on Hofstede’s Power Distance Index as the most submissive to authority of any people in the world—chose to defy their government and join a “Walk for Democracy.” They heeded the call of Bersih 2.0, a coalition of 62 non-governmental organizations that calls for free and fair elections. In the days before the rally, the Malaysian government cracked down. It rounded up 200 leaders associated with the movement, claiming that they were “waging war against the King” and trying to overthrow the government. It declared both the Bersih coalition and the planned rally illegal, and in a truly bizarre action, it declared the color yellow—Bersih’s signature color—illegal. Malaysian citizens were arrested for possessing Bersih literature or wearing yellow T-shirts. The police established roadblocks around the city and banned 91 Bersih and opposition leaders from entering the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. By the morning of July 9, the city was in total lockdown.

Then something remarkable happened. As Ambiga Sreenevasan, the distinguished attorney who leads Bersih put it, the Malaysian people showed that they no longer would be intimidated by their government. They chose to march, knowing that they would be met by tear gas, chemical-laced water cannon, and police batons. Even after Bersih’s leadership was arrested, Malaysians of all ages, races and religions continued their “Walk for Democracy” through the streets of Kuala Lumpur. They locked arms, they sang their national anthem and “We Shall Overcome,” they blew bubbles and carried flowers. They were peaceful. The only muscle seen that day was the heavy hand



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of the police. Human Rights Watch later called the police force excessive, the 1,670 arrests unwarranted, and the police attacks on marchers unprovoked.

This repression by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak and his government drew international condemnation, and it also put a lie to Najib’s two-year effort to portray himself as a modern, liberal-minded leader. More importantly, and of greater concern to Najib and his United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party—the main party that has ruled Malaysia continuously since independence in 1957—is that it awakened a new generation of politically active Malaysians. It is too soon to know whether the movement for electoral reform and the establishment of true democracy in Malaysia will be sustained. If it is, then July 9 will be remembered as a turning point in Malaysia’s history.

Just How Free and Democratic is Malaysia?

Why should a government be so afraid of a call for fair elections? Like his predecessors, Najib claims that demonstrations will lead to chaos, even though the right of assembly is guaranteed by the nation’s constitution and is commonplace in any true democracy. As for free and fair elections, Najib says that Malaysia already has them; if not, then opposition parties would not have achieved the gains they made in the 2008 elections, when they received 47 percent of the popular vote and took control of five states. Opposition parties counter that if elections truly were fair and free, they would form the government and not the UMNO-led coalition.

Political rhetoric aside, Malaysia’s electoral system has been analyzed by academics in Australia, Malaysia, the United States, and elsewhere. In addition, the state of Malaysia’s political freedom has been assessed by many international groups. The Economist Intelligence Unit, for example, labels Malaysia a “flawed democracy” in its Democracy Index. Freedom House says that Malaysia is only “partly free.” Reporters Without Borders places Malaysia 141st out of the 178 countries in its Press Freedom Index. On elections, the US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices declares that Malaysian opposition parties are unable to compete on equal terms with the governing UMNO-dominated coalition because of restrictions on campaigning and freedom of assembly and association. “News of the opposition,” the report says, is “tightly restricted and reported in a biased fashion.” Academics point to the Election Commission’s gerrymandering, which creates highly imbalanced districts that favor the ruling party, where the number of voters per electoral district can range from 7,000 to over 100,000. Over the years there have been numerous credible reports of the use of phantom voters, stuffed ballot boxes, vote-buying, and abuse of government resources to attract votes. In Sarawak’s state elections this past April, Prime Minister Najib was caught on video, blatantly telling a village gathering that his government would give them US\$1.5 million for a local project, but only if they elected his candidate.

What Should Be Done?

Malaysia’s government may assert otherwise, but the evidence is overwhelmingly on Bersih’s side. Malaysia is not a full democracy, and its elections are neither free nor fair. Malaysian citizens have awakened to that fact. Now the world’s democracies need to stand on the right side of Malaysia’s future. The United States has a multitude of interests in Malaysia, one of which is to help strengthen democracy and the rule of law. Human rights groups have condemned what they call the US Government’s “lukewarm” response to the events of July 9. This is a moment when the United States, which named Bersih’s leader Ambiga Sreenevasan an International Woman of Courage in 2009, can show the same courage and make a difference in the life of a nation.