

22/06/1999

Congressional hearing unlikely to alter US policy

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THE hearing on Malaysia by the United States House of Representative Congressional sub-committee last week raises more questions than it sought to answer.

Why was it held? Why now? How did it figure in the American legislative process?

The chairman for the House Sub-Committee of Asia and Pacific Doug Bereuter said that it was meant to educate the American public on events in Malaysia. It was also to let the Malaysian Government know that the United States was watching. Watching what?

Presumably the political situation in Malaysia running up to the general election, the trial of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the like.

With a title like "Malaysia: Assessing the Mahathir Agenda", it seemed to be working towards a conclusion before a hypothesis could be laid out.

If it was meant to educate Americans as suggested by Bereuter, it failed, because the whole session was leaning toward a bias and was letting out negative vibes even before it started.

Malaysia's ambassador to the US Datuk Ghazzali Sheikh Khalid while recognising the rights of the Congress to hold the hearing as part of the country's political and legislative process, nevertheless questioned the exercise. "It seems to me it was indeed an exercise to enable those with jaundiced views of Malaysia to have a platform."

The US Congress, which is the country's legislative body, is made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each house has several committees and under them sub-committees, dealing with a host of subjects.

The Congressional committees hold hearings often, as means of weighing legislative proposals.

Hearings may also be held merely as an information gathering exercise. The "Mahathir Agenda" hearing is believed to fall into this category.

It was to inform Congress of the situation in Malaysia, and if need be, what it should do to address the situation.

Like everything else, the committees are not immune to politics and lobbying. Any issue can be a subject for hearing if enough leg work is done to get someone to agree to hear them.

Ghazzali did not accept the argument that the hearing was an educational process to the American public, not only because it was sparsely attended and hardly noticed in Capitol Hill, but because it offered nothing new.

"I cannot fathom what useful purpose the hearing served. There was no elucidation or enlightening of knowledge on Malaysia."

There were four speakers who testified at the hearing.

The president of US-Asean Business Council Ernest Z. Bower, who has been travelling to Malaysia for 12 years, corrected the impression that Malaysia was a dangerous, unstable country with leaders hostile to American interests.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Ralph Boyce, in articulating Washington's position, described bilateral relations with Malaysia as excellent, but recognised that rethorics might affect the country's interest in Malaysia.

A Singaporean economist teaching in a university in the US, Dr Linda Lim, assuming the role of an expert on Malaysian economy, questioned the effectiveness of capital controls in lending stability to the country.

From her perch in the ivory tower she repeated the now popular opinion that Malaysia's economy would have recovered nicely even if the controls were never put in place.

But the most negative views came from Douglas Paal, the president of the Asia Pacific Policy Center based in Washington, DC.

Paal said his personal attention to Malaysia was drawn to the economic success combined with its "so far" successful management of historically sensitive racial and ethnic issues.

"My interest was deepened further by the magnetic personality of Anwar, now jailed and undergoing further trial of lurid charges in a courtroom in Kuala Lumpur.

"Anwar became a good friend, as well as a benign face for Malaysia to the outside world, during his term in office."

Dr Mahathir, he suggested has had running spats with the US, Singapore, Britain, Australia, the Philippines and others, by way of "harsh tongue lashings" to influence the politics of the country.

"Often Dr Mahathir has ridden these controversies, or even started them, to move events in his directions.

"...one of the charms of Anwar was that he did not naturally indulge himself in this posturing. With Dr Mahathir, we have come to expect it."

He said the economic crisis in Asia had brought changes in the leaderships of South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia, but "Dr Mahathir was clearly determined not to follow his neighbours' path to political exit".

But Paal was more than an admirer of Anwar. He admitted that his centre had benefited financially from its collaboration with Anwar through the hosting conferences.

Bernamea reported that the centre had also received donations from Anwar and his associates.

Admiring someone who is against the Government or benefiting from his friendship should not disqualify the validity of Paal's opinion of Malaysia and its government. He could after all still be objective.

But questions with regard to the merits of his comments must surely be raised when the views he expressed were mere repetitions from the pages of the Opposition manual. But then again it might just be a coincidence.

Paal also gave a rather disturbing advice to the committee.

"For the next several years, I recommend that the US maintain a correct, but cool relationship with the Dr Mahathir government.

"His age and the underlying social and political turbulence of Malaysia suggest broadening the base of American contacts and interests in that country against the probability of significant political change."

One may speculate what "broadening the base of American contacts and interests" means, but coming from a former spook - he was a senior director with the National Security Council and a senior analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency - it does have a sinister ring to it.

If information emanating from Washington suggesting that the centre is a lightweight think-thank in its last gasp of existence with funds running dry, were true then there is less to be worried about.

But if the centre were as influential as its members claim to be then there will be a cause for concern.

In the greater scheme of things, the hearing bears little significance to the legislative process of the US. It is unlikely that the hearings would dramatically alter the US policy with regard to Malaysia, a major trading partner and a pragmatic ally on many international issues.

The question is why is the hearing held now?

Perhaps it is because of the imminent general election. One can only speculate.

Allegations of foreign interferences in the internal affairs of the

country are rather dicey propositions. Without proof they tend to reflect badly on the person making the allegations.

Suspicion is never evidence. Among the country's sophisticates and intelligentsia, such allegations are something to be laughed at, or at worse signs of paranoia.

But having been inundated with numerous accounts of conspiracy theories this past year or so, one could not be faulted for starting to see figures lurking in the shadows.

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