

Turmoil in Malaysia

SUN 19 AUG 2001

By Amy Ridenour

The United States has had two unpleasant experiences with radical Islamic fundamentalist rule: Iran and Afghanistan. In each case we expected the modern norms of global exchange to apply after Islamic fundamentalist seized control. We were mistaken.

Instead, we were met by ferocious and fanatical hatred. Ayatollah Khomeini's rule began with a 444-day hostage crisis. We learned the hard way that there was no way to negotiate, compromise or even talk with a leader as implacably opposed to democracy and tolerance as Khomeini. Afghanistan reinforced the lesson.

After the United States poured millions of dollars and vital intelligence to the anti-Soviet Mujjahiddin, an Islamic fundamentalist government took power. It is profoundly anti-American, openly sheltering the world's most notorious international terrorist, Osama bin Laden, whose 1998 terrorist bombings of two U.S. embassies killed 224 people.

The Taliban has fashioned a regime far less tolerant than anything Leonid Brezhnev ever imagined a dictatorship of the clerics that revels in the destruction of irreplaceable ancient cultural Buddhist masterpieces as it publicly flogs a woman accused of walking in public with a man who is not a relative. The United States would do well to avoid a third experience. Consider Malaysia, a parliamentary democracy of 22 million located south of Vietnam, where a former government official with close links to radical Islamic fundamentalists has begun an international public relations effort to destabilize the government. The effort pits former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim against

his former mentor, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad. The rivalry has caused political upheaval. Anwar is presently in jail, the result of a 1999 corruption conviction.

Recently, Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, visited the United States. Betting that Americans would be sympathetic to a woman whose husband is in prison, particularly since the charges had political overtones, lobbyists controlled by her husband orchestrated the trip.

Anwar's political history began as a student activist at the University of Malaya in the 1960s. He believed the religious instruction he received at boarding school had been perfunctory, and began to make fiery public speeches about Islam both inside and beyond the university.

Upon graduation in 1971 he played a leading role in founding Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or ABIM, the Malaysian fundamentalist youth movement. By its own description, ABIM aimed to generate an Islamic movement as a path to Islamic revival in Malaysia. Anwar traveled to Iran to meet with Khomeini. He was arrested in 1974 for his role in a student demonstration while his organization taking one page each from Marx and the creed of radical Islam denounced labor exploitation and "all things repugnant to the spirit of Islamic justice." Anwar's jailing came after he became an open political rival of Mr. Mahathir, leading rallies of up to 50,000 people calling for political change.

Since then, fundamentalist Islamic student groups have taken control of student unions at most public universities, and anti-government activities have resulted. On July 4, for instance suspected arson destroyed a building at the

University of Malaya. The Islamic Party of Malaysia has gained seats in parliament. In recent years, Malaysia has made extraordinary strides in its development as a prosperous, stable and democratic state. Except for the downturn that affected all of Asia in 1998, Malaysia is enjoying impressive economic growth, with annual 5 per cent to 10 per cent GDP increases over the last decade.

In the ranking of Asian economies, its per capita gross domestic product of approximately \$7,370 is immediately behind South Korea's and ahead of seven others. Malaysia is America's 12th-largest trading partner and its 17th-largest export market. U.S. trade with Malaysia exceeds U.S. trade with India, Indonesia and Russia combined. Malaysia is not perfect. Its levels of economic freedom, regulations on trade and limits on private property rights led the Heritage Foundation to conclude in 2001 that its economy is "mostly unfree."

The Malaysian legal system, like America's, is based on English common law, but some abuses have been alleged. It is a tragedy of history that dictators often seize power by exploiting popular movements. Consider Fidel Castro's Cuba, or Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua, as well as Khomeini's Iran. The United States was fooled in Iran and Afghanistan. It would be dangerous to be fooled again. As the old saying goes: "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." The proverb has no line for those who are fooled a third time.

Amy Ridenour is president of The National Center for Public Policy Research, a non-partisan Capitol Hill think tank. (www.nationalcentercorg) Washington Times