

12 NOV 2001

Conference (Special Report)

DR MAHATHIR'S STANDING IMPROVING IN THE US

By: Salmu Hashim

WASHINGTON, Nov 12 (Bernama) -- Over a month ago, many analysts here thought that Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would not have much of a chance to meet with the new president of the United States George W. Bush.

Dr Mahathir was said to be carrying too much baggage. The "Anwar factor" and the prime minister's anti-West and anti-America rhetoric were seen as perhaps a liability in Washington.

The new president, who managed to wiggle his way into the White House with a squeaking margin during the presidential elections last year, has so far met with Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

He is scheduled to meet with Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Philippine President Gloria Arroyo-Macapagal in November.

If Bush had lost Florida, Democrat Al Gore, whom Dr Mahathir had taken exception to for his infamous remarks in Kuala Lumpur at the Apec leaders' summit, would be walking in the White House today. And the telephone lines between Kuala Lumpur and Washington would probably have been dead.

But after several recounts of the archaic "butterfly ballots", Bush finally claimed victory and the new president had to work extra hard to win the hearts and minds of Gore's supporters who felt cheated.

But the Sept 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington (or the "9 eleven" attacks as they are known here) changed all that.

There is hardly a whimper in Washington nowadays calling for Dr Mahathir to step down. Arrests of members of the KMM militant group in Malaysia hardly get any press and quietly regarded in the administration as a wise decision following the attacks on New York's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in Washington by terrorists using hijacked jetliners.

Some members of the opposition PAS, who until last month were welcomed in Washington, are now finding it impossible to get a visa to enter the US.

Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir is currently perceived as the voice of a "moderate" Muslim country at a time when the US is building an international coalition to "smoke out" violent Muslim "extremists."

Bush spoke with Dr Mahathir over the telephone on Oct 1 and the two met for the first time at the Apec leaders summit in Shanghai last month, where they talked about terrorism and other issues for about 40 minutes.

The meeting was said to have "thawed" the "chilly" US-Malaysia relations. The White House has not formally extended an invitation for the PM to visit Washington but both sides are not writing off the idea.

University of Malaya business administration lecturer Dr K S Jomo, who spoke at a conference on Malaysia here Saturday said, Dr Mahathir's standing has "arguably" improved in the US following the Sept 11 attacks.

However, Jomo expected a bumpy ride on the way to normalisation of US-Malaysia relations.

Another speaker, Umno Supreme Council member Datuk Azim Mohamad Zabidi said: "Dr Mahathir is misunderstood in the US and the West as he tends to shoot from the hips. To be fair, Dr Mahathir's remarks have not helped in bridging US-Malaysia relations."

However, two things appeared to have changed the relations -- a change in the US administration, and the Sept 11 tragedy.

After the attacks, Dr Mahathir went to the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to sign the condolence book and "the rhetoric against the US died down,"

Azim said at the conference.

US-Malaysia relations was the focus of the one-and-a-half day conference hosted by the prestigious Johns Hopkins University. More than 100 Washington scholars, thinkers and senior US government officials turned up at the conference, perhaps the first of its kind in the US, in many years.

What was refreshing about the gathering was the panel of Malaysian political parties made up of Umno, MCA, DAP and Keadilan. Unfortunately, PAS was absent. An invited PAS representative failed to obtain a visa to enter the US, while another could not come because of a family emergency.

The dialogue on changes in the Malaysian political scene between members of the opposing forces was lively and open. It was perhaps the first time that members of the ruling and the opposition parties sat down at one table to articulate openly their thoughts on political transformations in the country and where Malaysia should be headed.

While their ideas diverged on the country's future and as they took friendly jabs at one another, they appeared to have one common thread running through them -- i.e. a strong love for Malaysia and the need for change in the political landscape to meet the challenges of today.

DAP national vice-chairman Lim Guan Eng said the prime minister previously viewed as "outdated is in vogue." Dr Mahathir is "in ascendancy" and the Sept 11 terror attacks on the US had helped him to consolidate his position.

Lim expressed his wariness that human rights and democracy would be placed in the back burner as Malaysians dealt with fear engendered by terrorist attacks in the US and elsewhere.

Khairy Jamaluddin, an Umno Youth executive committee member who views himself as one of the reformists within Umno, noted current efforts by the party to change by the creation Puteri Umno, removal of "sleaze" from the party and increased interaction with the community.

He alluded that change, though not impossible within the conservative party, could not be done overnight as many party members held strongly to their party ideals and many members believed that "Malay rights are set in stone."

Meanwhile, Ti Lian Ker, a Pahang MCA state assemblyman called on Umno to transform itself by taking up popular issues that transcends race, religion and culture.

To sustain its power base, Umno should not imitate PAS by taking up the Islamic agenda or stick to its Malay agenda, which has reached its maturity. Instead, Umno must cultivate a new political market based on broader issues that appeal to all Malaysians, Ti said.

Members of the panel later gave the Malaysian view of the US response to the Sept 11 attacks. While the speakers sympathised with the US over the attacks, all agreed that bombing of Afghanistan was an inappropriate response.

They agreed that the US should reach out to the people in the Muslim world instead of protecting corrupt and oppressive leaders. The US too should find out the root cause of the Muslim rage and review its unpopular foreign policies in Palestine, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

A member of the audience said that he was struck by the articulate and intelligent comments made by the Malaysian speakers and was "very impressed" by their ability to articulate very complex issues.

Dr Bridget Welsh, prime mover of the conference, noted that a member of the audience told her that there was "hope for Malaysia" if these were young leaders being produced in the country.

Welsh planned to organise similar seminars on Malaysia at Johns Hopkins every two years in the hope of fostering better understanding and improved

relations between Malaysia and the US.

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SH RYN