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Volte-face by the United States in the interest of national security

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AN American journalist based in Hong Kong is down in Kuala Lumpur, trying to figure out how real the threat of Islamic militancy is in Malaysia.

He is on assignment to find out if militancy or extremism is on the rise in Malaysia and the likelihood of such groups taking over the nation.

The terrorist attacks on Washington and New York last week have spooked Americans, especially those not exposed to Muslim-dominated nations or the teachings of Islam, making them suspicious about the faith and its followers.

In the United States, the CNN reported that three Middle-Eastern Muslims were "kicked off" a Northwest flight because other passengers refused to fly with them aboard.

Such is the paranoia and prejudice towards Arabs, Muslims and Islam.

From 1998 through 1999, the American media like the rest of the western media, was very much against the present Barisan Nasional Government and was supportive of the Pas-led Opposition Front.

Then, in their prejudice against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, they could not see that a religious-based political party could be a threat to democracy and that a nation ruled by fundamentalist theocratic leaders could lead to the creation of a more dangerous Western foe.

Most of the Western media were very much against the recent use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) to arrest suspected militants and joined the chorus of protest from the Malaysian opposition, echoing the sentiment that the arrests were politically-motivated and the use of the ISA was a definite violation of human rights.

But of late, some of the journalists have toned down their attacks on the use of the ISA, grudgingly admitting that the preventive measures taken by the Malaysian Government were an "evil necessity".

Some, like the newly-arrived American journalist, are beginning to look into the possibility that there may be militants in Malaysia given the fact that militant elements are based in Southern Thailand, Indonesia and Southern Philippines.

While the ruling BN government can take comfort that the Western media now acknowledges that the measures it took to be "quite right", the swing of the pendulum should actually serve as a reminder to Malaysians on how to deal with information, especially that sourced from the West.

The changing views of the West can be attributed to numerous reasons, among others, the fear of the unknown (in this case, Muslims and Islam) or to justify whatever means the United States administration may resort to in retaliation for the attacks.

While the first reason reflects Western prejudice, the latter reflects its double standards in passing moral judgment on other Governments.

If Malaysia's ISA is deemed to be a violation of human rights, then the US Government's plan to empower its immigration and naturalisation laws with indefinite detention is equally unacceptable by any human rights standards which the West itself outlined.

If that is not enough, then surely the suggestion to rescind President Gerald Ford's directive banning political assassinations throws human rights right down the drain.

On that score, Malaysians, from both ends of the political divide should by now realise how easy it is for the West to pass moral judgment and

impose its values upon others.

It is clearly a case where, as long as the problems are prevalent in nations outside the West, the values those nations hold to, be they on human rights, and the economic solutions they resort to, such as bail-outs, should be opposed and condemned.

But when the problems emerge in the West's own backyard, the practices of the condemned nations can be emulated in the name of national interest.

Indeed, the US administration is now hard-pressed to "bail out" the American airlines which are facing major losses following the terrorist attacks.

The justification is that they are strategic corporations and there is a need to ensure that a large number of its citizenry do not suffer unemployment.

With that, the act to save these corporations becomes one which is filled with compassion and good governance. Yet when the same thing was done by other nations, the worst aspersions were cast.

The BN Government suffered bad press from the Western media in the recent past. Now that Western reports are more favourable, the Government should not rush to embrace these reports which are simply self-serving.

Similarly with the Opposition alliance. If they had then agreed with the reports which were supportive of their cause, it is time for them to swallow reports which may be detrimental to their struggle.

But the best solution would be to realise that the media has its individual bias, and that the prejudices of the West towards the East are entrenched.

The American journalist is travelling to the East Coast, hoping to see activities linked to extremism and militancy.

A day trip will not provide him with much insight but would be enough for him to come up with a report.

But the West, and especially the United States, can rest assured that extremism and militancy would not be allowed to fester in this country, at least not under the present Government.

They should probably go to Indonesia.

The western media has declared the country to be enjoying a democratic exuberance.

A few groups with the Front Pembela Islam (FPI - Defenders of Islam Front) have openly declared that they will attack the US embassy and "kick out" Americans from the country if the US attacks Afghanistan.

In Malaysia, Americans and other foreigners need not fear such prejudice.

Anyone who dared to declare such intentions would by now be in jail.