The post-9/11 world and Malaysia
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In two days' time, the United States and parts of Europe will commemorate solemnly the 10th anniversary of the Sept 11 attacks. While the losses of innocent lives on that fateful day are indeed tragic and deserve to be properly remembered, life will go on pretty much the same for the rest of the world.

But some cannot help perceiving themselves to be among the collateral damage of the so-called war on terrorism. Afghans and Iraqis, for instance, were made to endure the pains of bereavement because of the overreaction and irrational response by the Bush administration. They too will never forget the enormous significance of Sept 11 that altered the course of world politics, but in a very different way.

The grief and sorrows may stay fixated, there is no denial nevertheless that the post-9/11 mindset has allowed Washington to behave according to its whims and fancies, all in the name of fighting against global terrorism.

Many disagree when I seek to compare the Cold War era with the post-9/11 world, but a closer examination clearly reveals that, while the protagonists and the ideologies may have changed to a large extent, the US under President Bush was pleased to permit countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan to carry on detaining and even physically abusing their dissidents under the pretext of terrorism investigation.

Yes, it was not quite dissimilar from the Cold War period in which dictators ranging from Chiang Kai-shek of Taiwan, Suharto of Indonesia to Augusto Pinochet of Chile were given free rein to terrorise their people and to deprive them of democracy, all for the sake of fighting against communism.

Much of the 'free world' even turned a blind eye to the oppression of the non-white populations by the racist-supremacist regime in South Africa, simply because the African National Congress had forged alliance with the communists.

Nelson Mandela (left) was not recognised as a freedom fighter by the White House until after the demise of the Soviet Union. PW Botha, having served western interests for years, felt bitterly betrayed when he was forced to make way for other white leaders who were willing to work on national reconciliation.

Fast-forward to the post-9/11 world, Hosni Mubarak had his shelf-life extended as he was needed more than ever to keep the Muslim Brotherhood at bay. Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia was also a key partner whom former Secretary of State Colin Powell once praised as a “good and strong friend”. The volumes of evidence of atrocities against Tunisians were conveniently ignored.

Now that Ben Ali has fallen from grace and Mubarak is being tried for human rights violations, the two men must be feeling resentful of their own foolishness and short-sightedness. But the most regretful man on earth today has to be Colonel Qaddafi, who eliminated immediately all plans for weapons of mass destruction after the Iraq War in 2003 and even made himself available to play a part in the CIA's 'extraordinary rendition programme'.

Compressing challenges into a single threat

Robin Niblett, Director of Chatham House in London, once expressed his grave concern that abusing post-9/11 sentiments could lead one to compress all kinds of challenges into a single threat, thereby missing out on other core issues. He cannot have been more right. The militarisation of diplomacy over the last decade prompted the Bush administration to start two wars, rendering the superpower considerably more vulnerable than never before.

Dominique Moisi at the French Institute of International Studies writes “the purported American victory against fundamentalism has been a Pyrrhic one”, while Thomas L Friedman laments it as being “one of

the greatest lost opportunities of any presidency - ever".

Seumas Milne of the Guardian (which James Wong the staunch Iraq War apologist once described as being "fanatically left-wing") is heartened by the tremendous growth of the newspaper's readership in the US as "millions of Americans looked for a perspective and range of views they weren't getting at home".

In Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, then facing the severest legitimacy crisis in his leadership because of the political and judicial persecution of Anwar Ibrahim, suddenly gained a new lease of life when he exploited the tragedy in New York to not only condemn the attacks (which he did right), but to also tar PAS - the Islamic party and his most daunting foe - with the brush of terrorism (which he did wrong).

As Professor Gordon Means at McMaster University points out in his book Political Islam in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has always faced a much lesser threat from clandestine radical Islamist groups, but an expert view as such will always be shrugged off by politicians desperate for survival.

Hence, scores of individuals were detained under the notorious Internal Security Act, while the mainstream media were employed to take the wind out of the opposition's sails by smearing it as being involved in terrorist activities.

Having tasted his initial victory when the DAP parted with PAS for fear of losing non-Muslim support in the climate of Islamophobia, Mahathir went on to declare Malaysia a "moderate" Islamic state as opposed to the "cruel" version offered by the Islamic party.

In retrospect, what happened in the heart of the world's financial centre in 2001 reverberated as far afield as in Malaysia, where Mahathir saw a turnaround in his political fortunes while the opposition's onward momentum was effectively stalled.

A blessing in disguise

But it was also a blessing in disguise. The unbridled use of the ISA against political opponents and just-minded Malaysians - the majority of whom were Malays - eventually awakened the nation to the arbitrary and authoritarian nature of the state.

Instead of taking the breathing space to strengthen public institutions and democratise Umno, Mahathir and later Abdullah Ahmad Badawi continued to manipulate Malaysian politics for their own benefits. I would not hesitate to state here loud and clear that the erosion of democracy and the brazen grab for national resources have come to characterise the most abject failure of Umno in the post-9/11 Malaysia.

Acutely aware of Islamophobia as a global phenomenon and having learned from its humiliating defeat in the 2004 general election, PAS embarked on a journey of re-establishing itself as a democratic and moderate force. Through its alliance with Parti Keadilan Rakyat and resumed ties with the DAP, not to mention the close interactions with other civic groups including Bersih and the Gabungan Mansuhkan ISA, PAS was steadfastly reaching out to the widest electorate possible.

At a time when Umno was freakishly using the world's images of the Twin Towers being hit by airplanes to scare the populace, PAS took an entirely opposite course of engaging itself with non-Muslims, nurturing a budding culture of democratic debate along the way.

Granted, there are still vibrantly conservative (but not radical) elements within the Islamic party, one must nevertheless not lose sight of the fact that many taboos have now been broken and more and more historical, political, social and even religious issues are being publicly debated, as evidenced by the on-going debate between Umno and PAS over the Bukit Kepong incident.

It is indeed premature to suggest all this as a precursor of a democratic spring. It does however indicate the best way to contain radicalism is through greater democratic participation. Seen in this light, Umno has no doubt squandered its opportunity to transform itself into a broad church although it had taken

advantage of the post-9/11 mindset, and brilliantly so.

Is it not ironic enough that, as Malaysians think back to the horror of Sept 11, the Islamic party that was once demonided by the ruling elite now looks more benign than its ostensibly more 'rational' archrival?

And it is up to the US to decide whether it too shall ditch the post-9/11 mindset and seek genuine engagement with the Muslim world, or the post-dictatorial Tunisia, Egypt and Libya will remain its client states. Re-examining Washington's ties with the authoritarian regimes of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain - to name but two - may be a good start.

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