

Just What Dr. M Ordered - The war against terror yields unexpected benefits for the Malaysian Prime Minister—at home and abroad

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The skinny 25-year-old munching on a Big Mac in a Kuala Lumpur suburb doesn't realize it, but he represents salvation for Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Once a member of the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Kamaruddin defected to the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia as a result of Mahathir's treatment of his charismatic deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, three years ago. Joining what appeared to be a rising tide of public sentiment, Kamaruddin and his friends attended numerous street demonstrations and political meetings in support of the Islamic Party, known by its Malay acronym PAS, and its allies.

All that changed with the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington. Kamaruddin had been harboring doubts about PAS prior to the attack, but its call for a jihad, or holy war, against the U.S. in Afghanistan was the final straw. The party has held demonstrations in front of the U.S. embassy, its supporters shouting "Death to America" and "Long Live the Taliban." That helped crystallize Kamaruddin's concerns about what would happen should PAS come to power in Malaysia. "They are quite capable of ruling Taliban-style," he says. "Women might lose their right to work or be banned from even walking in the streets."

While most political leaders in the Islamic world are struggling to cope with the repercussions of the terror strikes in the U.S., the fallout from the attacks has played entirely in Mahathir's favor. Not only has PAS lost ground, but the opposition alliance that scarred UMNO badly in elections two years ago has collapsed, its component parties in disarray. Only a few months ago, senior UMNO members acknowledged privately that Mahathir's personal unpopularity over the Anwar affair could cause a disastrous plunge in support among the party's core constituency, the indigenous Malay Muslims who make up about 60% of the population. Now, many speculate Mahathir might call snap polls to capitalize on the opposition's misfortunes.

Mahathir's international profile has also improved dramatically since Sept. 11. U.S. President George W. Bush has phoned to solicit his counsel; the two men had a special meeting at the APEC summit in Shanghai last week. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are wooing Mahathir because "they feel they can use him as a voice for moderation in the Islamic world," says Razak Baginda, head of a pro-government think tank in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia's relations with the U.S. had been soured by American criticism of the jailing of Anwar. Mahathir has long been eager to mend ties with his country's biggest trade partner and investor, dispatching three separate envoys to Washington this year; as recently as July, Malaysia's Foreign Minister was told by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell that a requested meeting between the two leaders would depend on improved treatment of Anwar and detained members of the opposition. Now the Americans are listening. On Oct. 1, Bush phoned to ask Mahathir's advice on fighting terrorism and set a date for the two to meet at the APEC conference. Two weeks later,

U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick was in Kuala Lumpur, lavishly praising Malaysia for its help in the fight against terrorism. Mahathir has criticized the American attacks in Afghanistan, but at Shanghai, Bush went out of his way to emphasize that he respected Mahathir's position on the Afghan campaign. "He is concerned about the death of innocent people in Afghanistan and I assured him that I am, too," Bush said.

For good measure, the terror attacks have strengthened Mahathir's own crackdown on militant Islamic groups at home. At the beginning of August, police arrested 10 members of the Malaysian Mujahideen Group, which they say is headed by the son of the PAS spiritual leader, alleging they were responsible for a range of crimes, including bank robberies, assassinations and bombings of churches and Hindu temples. At the time, some opposition leaders accused Mahathir of manufacturing the terrorism bogey to undermine his political enemies. The more recent arrests of six other alleged militants have raised not a murmur of protest. "People feel there is something in the Islamic militancy issue after Sept. 11," says Chandra Muzaffar, deputy president of the National Justice Party, a PAS ally founded in the wake of Anwar's arrest. "Any party associated even in a tangential way with militancy has no chance in Malaysia."

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