

## **Mahathir gets White House 'rehabilitation'**

By Jim Lobe

May 17, 2002

WASHINGTON - The degree to which Washington's global relationships have been transformed by last September's terrorist attacks was made amply clear with this week's visit here by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

Treated virtually as a pariah by the administration of president Bill Clinton for his attacks on Jews, his refusal to follow the advice of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the suppression of domestic opponents including his one-time heir apparent, Mahathir was greeted warmly as a comrade-in-arms in the war against terrorism by President George W Bush on Tuesday.

Mahathir went on to lecture a banquet hall of US business executives on the evils of terrorism - including "attacks against civilians by Israeli forces in Jenin and elsewhere" - and was given a standing ovation by his corporate audience while embassy officials distributed a one-page statement signed by Bush on White House stationery which declared Malaysia "a modern, moderate, and prosperous Muslim state [and] an important example to the region and the rest of the world".

In between, the Malaysian leader put in a strong defense for what he termed "Asian values" during a meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill. "Democracy for people who are not used to it can undermine stability resulting in war," he told them. "One day perhaps we will be comfortable with your values but for the moment we are not comfortable," he said, adding that the West is simply too impatient for democratic change.

Mahathir is the latest in a series of leaders once kept at arm's length as authoritarian who are cashing in on their cooperation in Bush's seven-month-old anti-terrorist campaign with visits to the White House. Since September 11, the leaders of Algeria, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Yemen - men with whom US presidents ordinarily would not like to be photographed - have been warmly received as tried and true allies at the White House. All have used the war on terrorism not only to curry favor - and military aid - with the United States, but also to clamp down harder against their domestic foes, a trend which was predicted by human rights activists shortly after Bush made it clear that anti-terrorist cooperation would be a major test by which Washington would distinguish between friend and foe.

"That will be the first question the .. has for any country," predicted a former senior Clinton official shortly after the September 11 attacks. "What we've seen is a real paradigm shift in foreign policy in which the central organizing principle will be the effort against terrorism."

Mahathir's visit here, his first since 1994, offered proof of that proposition, if only because few other leaders - except those officially denounced by the State Department as

"rogues" - have so irked Washington in recent years, not so much for his discomfort with democracy as his independence and outspoken contempt for what he has termed Western values and hypocrisy. Even as he pursued Western investment in the early 1990s, Mahathir spoke out against policies pursued by the World Bank and the IMF and then broadened his attack by championing order, stability, and community ahead of more individualistic Western concepts of rights.

Tensions rose sharply after the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in mid-1997 when, contrary to the IMF's advice, Mahathir erected capital controls to try to insulate his economy and accused George Soros of leading speculative attacks against the ringgit, provoking a heated denial and countercharges by the US financier that Mahathir was seeking a scapegoat for his own failure. At one point, Mahathir argued there was a Jewish agenda to bring down Malaysia's economy, because "the Jews are not happy to see the Muslims progress", statements that brought charges of anti-semitism from a number of quarters.

Things went from bad to worse after Mahathir ousted and imprisoned his top deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, on sex-related charges that most observers believed were fabricated. Anwar, seen as a champion of the kind of political and economic reforms favored by the West at the time, became something of a cause celebre for senior Clinton officials. Even some senior Bush administration officials privately expressed satisfaction as recently as last summer over renewed economic problems in Malaysia that appeared to give new life to the opposition.

This changed after September 11 when Washington found in Mahathir a key ally in the fight against al-Qaeda and one who was not reluctant to use the draconian tools at his disposal - particularly the 40-year-old Internal Security Act (ISA), much criticized by the Clinton administration and domestic rights workers - to crack down against perceived Islamic militants. The ISA, which permits the government to hold suspects without trial for two years, was quickly marshaled to throw more than 75 alleged terrorists behind bars. These included the son of a top opposition leader from the Islamic Party of Malaysia and some of Anwar's supporters. Mahathir's government also rushed to provide key intelligence on some of the September 11 hijackers who passed through Malaysia and on others with apparent ties to al-Qaeda.

"Dr Mahathir is manipulating the war against terrorism to justify the use of the ISA," said Mike Jendrzeczyk, Washington director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, which publicly called for Bush to press Mahathir to repeal the ISA.

No such luck. In the five-minute photo opportunity open to journalists, Bush praised Mahathir for his strong support in the war against terror. After the meeting, Mahathir insisted that Bush had raised neither the ISA nor Anwar's fate in their private talks, an assertion that White House officials did not contradict. On the contrary, Mahathir reportedly lectured Bush on how to defeat terrorism.

Several hours later, Mahathir reported to the US-ASEAN (Association of Southeast

Asian Nations) Business Council that he and Bush "see eye to eye on this important issue of terrorism, and the United States can count on Malaysia's continued support in the fight against terrorism".

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