



PM Abdullah Badawi: A Kinder, Gentler Mahathir? by Ralph A. Cossa

Kuala Lumpur – Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi is proving to be a kinder, gentler, but no less candid, thoughtful, and thought-provoking version of his mercurial predecessor. The soft-spoken devout Muslim leader has surprised critics and supporters alike by taking an exceptionally firm stand against corruption and extremism since replacing Dr. Mahathir Mohammed last October and especially since winning an unprecedentedly-large mandate in this March's general elections. He has also delivered the type of pointed criticisms of both the west and the Islamic world for which his predecessor was noted, but without the deliberately racist, anti-Semitic invectives that served to largely overshadow Dr. Mahathir's otherwise important message.

Speaking before an international audience at the 18th Asia-Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur on June 1, PM Badawi observed that many Muslims were "in denial," refusing to acknowledge that "Islamic teachings have been corrupted by some groups to serve their militant cause." Killing innocent civilians is neither just nor legitimate, Badawi asserted: "Nothing can make a virtue out of the massacre of innocent men, women, and children." Undemocratic government, oppression, poverty, and poor governance all contribute to terrorism and must be addressed, he asserted. Most significantly, he acknowledged the need to "confront the militant teachings in the peripheries and discredit them," noting the need to "radically alter the curriculum of religious schools" in some countries.

The broader international community and especially the U.S. were also in denial, Badawi asserted, pointing to both the long-standing Israeli-Palestine conflict and the situation in Iraq as prominent among the root causes of terrorism that are not being sufficiently recognized and addressed. While acknowledging that "many mistakes have been made and they cannot be undone," he noted that the latest plan for Iraq "appears to give the world some hope for progress." For the plan to work, however, certain criteria and expectations must be met: the Iraqi people must exercise "full" sovereignty; any foreign forces on Iraqi soil should be part of a multinational force mandated by the UN; Iraq must develop indigenous capacity to provide for its own security; and the interim government must be seen as credible and independent. Washington shares these goals in principle; the challenge will be to convince the international community that it accepts them in practice as well.

More often than not, Badawi's criticisms of the U.S. were indirect, but no less pointed. Using the generic "we" to talk about the international community writ large, he observed that "some of our post-September 11 actions are alienating and

radicalizing even more people and breeding a new generation of terrorists." When he observed that "we are not only refusing to recognize some root causes, we are consciously and deliberately aggravating them," it was pretty clear which "we" he had in mind. One can also accuse the Prime Minister as being somewhat disingenuous when he observed that the Geneva Convention had been "brutalized," and that "such inhuman actions will not be easily forgotten or lightly forgiven." True, but it is useful to note that it was the U.S. government that exposed, condemned, and is actively investigating the abuses at Abu Ghraib; unacceptable actions which appear to be not unlike (and perhaps even less egregious) than those now being alleged as occurring in Malaysian detention centers.

All things considered, however, PM Abdullah Badawi's comments were balanced, thoughtful, and filled with good advice for both the Islamic world and the U.S./West in general. Ironically, the absence of racist, anti-Semitic rhetoric, while making the remarks more acceptable in the West, also resulted in a lack of international coverage of his important message. (The *International Herald Tribune* did make brief reference to the speech, but only to the anti-Western portion.)

In another example that it was no longer "business as usual" in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian *New Straits Times* (which did cover the Prime Minister's dual denial message) offered a second headline of interest that day: "PM raises Suu Kyi issue with [Myanmar Prime Minister] Khin," indicating that Malaysia, "while not interfering in Myanmar's internal affairs," could not ignore actions taken by a neighbor that were "a matter of interest to the international community." According to a statement issued by Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid, the Malaysian Prime Minister informed his Myanmar counterpart that "it was important that Malaysia and other ASEAN members be informed about the status of [Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's] house arrest and why her party, the National League for Democracy, was not participating in the country's national convention to draft its constitution."

There is a growing recognition in Malaysia, and throughout ASEAN, that actions in one country affect the interests of the others and thus cannot be ignored, non-interference principles notwithstanding. Indeed, this year's Roundtable included formal sessions on Myanmar's Key Problems and Prospects and on the Prospects for Democracy, Change, and Stability in Southeast Asia, reflecting a growing willingness among the ASEAN countries to discuss internal affairs and their impact on ASEAN's image and future prospects. This is especially critical in the case of Myanmar (Burma), since Rangoon is expected to assume the rotating ASEAN Chair in 2006, setting the stage for a showdown with ASEAN's regional dialogue partners (including the U.S.) if

progress has not been achieved in pursuing Prime Minister Khin's "roadmap to democracy."

This can only occur through continued "constructive engagement" on the part of Myanmar's ASEAN colleagues, and especially from Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, given Malaysia's lead role in integrating the black sheep of ASEAN back into the flock. If his performance thus far is any indication, it would appear that Malaysia's new prime minister is up to the task.

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