

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Malaysia's Post-9/11 Security Approach

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Abstract: Malaysia's security apparatus is well-entrenched. It consists of an operational level comprised of repressive laws and a philosophical component aimed at winning "hearts and minds." Malaysia's security policy is largely unchanged by the current global climate of the War on Terror. However, on the operational level, there are three exceptions to this: threats are now defined within the context of international terrorism, transnational co-operation has increased, and the ISA has seldom been criticised by the international community since 9/11. On the philosophical level, the government's history of anti-extremism has continued though it is now packaged in the new format of Islam Hadhari and is being more readily exported to other nations.

Keywords: Malaysia, security, terrorism, war on terror, Islam, counter-terrorism

Introduction

It is a cliché to state that the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 changed the world. This statement is certainly true when the adoption of repressive security laws in countries the world over and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are taken into account. In Malaysia, however, the difference is less noticeable. The Malaysian government's response to the events of 9/11 has been a swift, though often controversial, application of its well-established coercive apparatus, namely the Internal Security Act (ISA). The apparatus has continued to perform its primary function: the survival of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a Muslim-Malay party, in power since Malaysia's independence.

The Malaysian security apparatus has been in place since the Emergency period (1948-1960), during which Malayan forces, supported by the British, fought against Communist insurgents. During this period, the British centralised significant power in the hands of the government, notably through the creation of a number of Emergency Regulations, out of which evolved the ISA and the Sedition Act. The ISA provides for preventive detention of those seen as threats to national security. The Act allows the government to extend the period of detention by a period of two years, though this can continue indefinitely, with minimal judicial review. Complementing the ISA, the Sedition Act prohibits virtually all activities seen as causing disaffection towards the government or communal ill will. Working hand-in-hand with the coercive apparatus, somewhat paradoxically, was a "hearts and minds" campaign launched by the government. It was designed to win the loyalty of those susceptible to Communist propaganda and was regarded as one of the most notable and successful components of the regime's anti-Communist strategy. The Emergency period thus established Malaysia's security policy as one which was operationally oppressive but philosophically focused on dealing with the root causes.

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Although the Emergency was concluded in 1960, the government did not repeal the Emergency Regulations. Instead, the national government retained and used its authoritarian powers whenever it felt the interests of national security and racial harmony were threatened. Indeed, in 1960, the government amended the Constitution, namely Articles 149, 150 and 151 to allow for preventive detention. Broad terms were used here to pre-empt the revival of a communist insurrection, though no evidence was provided to justify such a move.

In the decades that followed, numerous justifications were provided to legitimise the use of the ISA and other repressive acts. The threat of Communism was used to justify crackdowns in the aftermath of the 1969 riots, though it was eventually found the Communists were not involved. The threat of ethnic violence, derived from the events of 1969, was utilised to legitimise the detention of political opponents in 1987's Operation Lalang and in the era of reformasi in the 1990s. Following the Islamic revival of the 1970s, interpretations of Islam that differed from the state's Islamisation project were either co-opted by the government – in the case of Anwar Ibrahim – or forcefully disbanded by the government via the ISA – as in the case of al Arqam and Al-Maunah.

The alleged threat posed by international terrorism in the wake of the 11 September attacks did not significantly alter the government's approach. Indeed, in the months prior to 9/11, the government had arrested several members of Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM), a group with connections to Jemaah Islamiyah and responsible for several bank robberies and the murder of state politician, Dr. Joe Fernandez. The period following 9/11 saw a continuation of this operational crackdown on international terrorism.

This article examines Malaysia's security model in the contemporary context of the "War on Terror." I argue that, on the whole, the apparatus remains largely unchanged, with a strong policy of coercion still embraced on the operational level combined with a "hearts and minds" philosophy that seeks to deal with the root causes of political extremism. In regards to the operational level, there are three main alterations to the security model. First, the notion of "threat" is being defined anew, with the "terrorist" label applied to groups operating against the interest of the government, be they a legitimate threat or not. Second there has been an increase in transnational cooperation in the area of security, most notably with the United States. Third, the ISA, once derided by much of the international community, is now no longer the subject of heated criticism by foreign governments, thereby somewhat validating its continued usage in Malaysia. In regards to the "hearts and minds" component, the government has continued its anti-extremist stance at the political level. Marking a shift in policy, though, the rhetoric has been revamped and repackaged into Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's Islam Hadhari philosophy. In fact, in an attempt to "rehabilitate" Islam in the eyes of the global audience, Malaysia has attempted to export Islam Hadhari to other countries, framing it as a "moderate" approach to development and a solution to extremism. The exportation of this model has thus far met with minimal success.

While the operational and rhetorical components of the Malaysian security approach are discussed separately below, it must be stressed at the outset that these two

elements form a cohesive whole. Malaysia's security policy is a total approach in that it attempts to deal with both the causes and the symptoms of threats, regardless of the contradictions in policy this has caused.

The Operational Component of Malaysia's Security Approach

The operational component of Malaysian security policy consists of a number of repressive laws, the most prominent of these being the ISA. On the whole, the security apparatus in Malaysia has been unchanged by the events of 9/11, with the same instruments used to curb threats to the ruling regime before and after the 2001 attacks. Indeed, as shown in the example of the KMM, the government had begun cracking down on groups allegedly affiliated with international terrorism in the months preceding the attacks on Washington and New York.

Despite this, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks Malaysia was described by US officials as a springboard state for al-Qaeda operations, including its operation on 9/11. Malaysia responded strongly against terrorism in both the short and long-term, at least in part to dispel this view, and establish itself in the new world climate as an anti-terror government. By early 2002, the government claimed to have arrested 62 terrorists and militias with "global and regional links" under the ISA.

While the ISA has thus continued to be utilised in the contemporary era, this has not led to an increase in its usage. In the entire year 2001, the number of ISA arrests was 70, while in 2002 the number of arrests decreased to 53. In every year since, the number of arrests and detention orders under the ISA has fallen drastically. The average number of arrests in the five-year period between 2002 and 2006 is 37 persons. By comparison, the average number of arrests in the previous five-year period, 1997 to 2001, totalled 126. In fact, the entire first five years of the War on Terror has featured, on average, less ISA arrests than any previous five-year period.² Thus, statistically, this current era has not brought about an increase in government-sponsored repression through its use of the ISA – if anything it has been marked by a statistical decrease.

In terms of the apparatus as a whole, the only major legislative development is the 2003 amendment to the Penal Code. The amendment provides a sentence of up to life imprisonment for "anyone who harbours or interferes with the arrest of terrorists, recruits members into a terrorist group or provide them with explosives or facilities such as meeting places." This could potentially affect lawyers and journalists as the confidentiality of clients/sources is a major part of their occupations. Although Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Dr Rais Yatim conceded that present laws were sufficient to tackle terrorism, he contended that the amendment was "appropriate."³ The amendment has yet to be enforced. Aside from this, the major alterations to Malaysia's security approach are threefold and are discussed separately below.

² These statistics derived from: Suaram, *Malaysia Human Rights Report 2006: Civil and Political Rights* (Petaling Jaya: Suaram Komunikasi, 2007), 13.

³ Beh Lih Yi, 'New anti-terror law passed amid strong protest', *Malaysiakini*, November 11, 2003, <http://malaysiakini.com/news/17787>.

(1) Redefining “Threat”

While, security-related arrests have declined in recent years, unjust repression has certainly continued. However, this repression is now defined in different terminology. Whereas before the label “communist” was applied liberally, the term “terrorism” has firmly replaced it. The terrorist label had been applied to so-called threats before 9/11 – often in reference to “communist terrorists” – but in modern times the term has a whole new meaning and brings up certain feelings. Thus, when the government defines an issue in terms of “terrorism” now, it is provoking a different reaction than in years past.

One of the most notable examples of this new vocabulary and discourse being utilised is in the government’s crackdown on the Malaysian internet blogging community. In February 2005, blogger Jeff Ooi was questioned by police for a comment somebody else had posted on his weblog *Screenshots*. The comment had stated it was contradictory for Abdullah to promote Islam Hadhari when UMNO itself was ripe with corruption. In early 2007, the government announced it was setting up a group of 500 writers to counter bloggers’ claims as well as track and monitor content that could be deemed “anti-government.” Subsequently, bloggers Nathaniel Tan and Raja Petra Kamarudin were, like Ooi, investigated for comments that had been posted on their blogs. Bloggers were thus being questioned by police on the basis of statements that were not even made by them.

In the lead up to the 2008 election, with the political blogging community becoming increasingly influential amongst Malaysia’s 11 million internet users, the government began expanding its campaign against them. Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin accused bloggers of being “dangerous”, “pro-West” and supporting “foreign elements bent on destroying our beloved country.”⁴ The government warned that it would use its anti-terror laws and apparatus – including the ISA – against bloggers and was looking at the possibility of formulating new laws to allow better monitoring. This is a clear example of the government utilising the fear and images associated with the concept of “terrorism” to justify the proposed implementation of its security policy. According to Nazri Aziz, Minister in the Prime Minister’s department, such action was designed not to stifle internet freedom but “to put a stop to the freedom to lie in the blogosphere.”⁵ A proposal to introduce a “code of ethics” for internet users was also floated. It is perhaps then not surprising that in 2007 Malaysia fell to its worst ever ranking in the *Reporters Sans Frontieres’s* press freedom index, dropping 32 spots to 124th position, behind Cambodia (85th), Timor Leste (94th) and Indonesia (100th). Ultimately, the government’s threats are designed to make people think twice not only about using blogs to criticise the government but about creating a blog in the first place.

⁴ ‘Fresh round of gov’t attacks on bloggers’, *Malaysiakini*, July 29, 2007, <http://malaysiakini.com/news/70510>.

⁵ ‘Nazri warns bloggers face harsh laws’, *Malaysiakini*, July 25, 2007, <http://malaysiakini.com/news/70375>.

In a further example, the traditional security issue of ethnic stability has also been placed within the context of terrorism. As noted, in the past the “bogeyman” of racial conflict was frequently alluded to by the government in various periods of crisis. In the contemporary context, though, this “bogeyman” has been blended with the new “bogeyman” – international terrorism. In an era where the “terrorist” and “religious extremist” label now has certain connotations, it is perhaps no surprise that, when the threatened, the BN has chosen to utilise such terms to undermine its detractors. This became apparent in its 2007/2008 skirmish with the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf).

On 25 November 2007, Hindraf held a rally in Kuala Lumpur in protest of what they saw as discriminatory government economic policies. Hindraf’s attempts to obtain a police permit for the march were denied but, citing the constitution’s guarantee of freedom of assembly and expression, the movement proceeded with the protest. Police eventually dispersed the rally with force. On 13 December, the government arrested five Hindraf leaders. Notably, days before the arrests, Hindraf was accused by Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Musa Hassan of “trying to seek support and help from terrorist groups.” Though Musa did not name the terrorist groups, it is assumed from accusations by the attorney-general in court that the IGP was referring to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. After their arrests, one of the Hindraf detainees claimed he was being pressured by police into admitting involvement with terrorist activities, stating:

The government and the police have no evidence to substantiate their accusations on our alleged terrorism links. As such they are now using the back way to obtain a confession from me by forcing me to admit of having terrorism link.⁶

The IGP also raised the commonly used spectre of racial conflict, stating, “[Hindraf]’s actions are potentially explosive in sparking racial clashes.”⁷

In the weeks following the Hindraf detentions, Prime Minister Abdullah utilised the term “extremist” in an attempt to continue sidelining the Hindraf movement. On 25 December 2007, in a clear reference to Hindraf, Abdullah warned Malaysians against religious extremists pulling the country apart. Abdullah urged Malaysia to continue with its “middle position”.⁸ Following the February 2008 Hindraf Rose Protest – in which some 200 people were arrested – Abdullah explicitly labelled the group as “extremists” who were attempting to disrupt the 8 March, 2008 election.⁹ In an attempt to counter claims of racism, Abdullah pointed out that the ISA had also been recently used against Muslim groups, such as Al-Maunah and JI. Abdullah said, “They are my people, who believe in the same religion. But I had a duty to carry out.

⁶ K. Kabilan, ‘Stop the police pressure, cries Hindraf detainee’, *Malaysiakini*, February 16, 2008, <http://malaysiakini.com/news/78141>.

⁷ ‘IGP: Hindraf linked to terrorist groups’, *Malaysiakini*, December 6, 2007, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/75760>.

⁸ ‘PM warns about religious extremism’, *Malaysiakini*, December 25, 2007 <http://malaysiakini.com/news/76390>.

⁹ ‘Rose violence: Global demo against M’sia’, *Malaysiakini*, February 17, 2008, <http://malaysiakini.com/news/78152>.

What is wrong is wrong. The law is colour blind.”¹⁰ By using these two organizations as examples, Abdullah had again linked Hindraf to religious extremism and international terrorism. However, his assertion of the law being “colour-blind” has not gone unchallenged. Dean Johns, writing for *Malaysiakini*, pointed out that, while several arrests had resulted from the Hindraf rallies, the government had not brought to justice the police responsible for the high rate of deaths in custody, particularly amongst Indian detainees. Nor did the government reprimand UMNO members who at the 2006 general assembly “threatened to bathe the keris in the blood of fellow Malaysians” and ex-Malacca Chief Minister Rahim Thamby Chik for his statement that “The Malays have never taken to the streets so do not force us to do so as we will draw our parang to defend the Ketuanan Melayu in this country.”¹¹

The discourse of terrorism has not only been utilised for operational purposes. At the political level, the notion of international terrorism has increased the stakes in the conflict between the two major Islamic parties – that being, UMNO and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). The competition between the two has been defined anew in the contemporary era, with UMNO effectively capitalising on PAS’s political missteps.

One such instance occurred with the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Commenting on the invasion, PAS leader Fadzil Noor declared the US a “terrorist state” and openly called for a “jihad” against it. The jihad was justified on the grounds that Afghanistan was attacked without strong proof of its involvement in the 9/11 attacks and terrorism, with Noor viewing the conflict as one against all Muslims. Noor claimed the call for jihad was not in defence of Afghanistan’s Taliban regime, but in defence of “an Islamic nation being attacked by an enemy of Islam.” Few were able to see the distinction. Such a view was reinforced in early October when PAS Youth Leader Mahfuz Omar launched a jihad fund, called on the government to break off diplomatic ties with the US, and declared his willingness to raise an army to fight in Afghanistan.

The BN in general and UMNO in particular capitalised effectively on PAS’s political faux pas, utilizing the image PAS had unwittingly constructed to score political points for the ruling coalition. The government claimed PAS’s call for jihad was “a gimmick” aimed at scoring political points within Malaysia’s Muslim community.¹² PAS was now portrayed as “Malaysia’s Taliban”, the government embarking on a television campaign which inter-spliced images of PAS leaders with the murder of a woman by the Taliban. Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah stated that “practically” all the militants arrested in the period between September 11 and the end of January 2002 were members of PAS, noting:

We don’t want to be very quick in drawing conclusions, but we are saying that the presence of these people among the PAS people can create a kind of PAS politics which may not be in the long-term interests of Malaysia.¹³

¹⁰ Carolyn Hong, ‘Malaysia ready to arrest more people under ISA’, *The Straits Times*, 17 December, 2007.

¹¹ See: Dean Johns, ‘Duplicity of Pak Liar’, *Malaysiakini*, December 12, 2007, <http://malaysiakini.com/news/75945>.

¹² ‘PAS backing for jihad against the US ‘a gimmick’’, *The Straits Times*, October 11, 2001.

¹³ ‘Terror investigations strain Malaysian politics’, *BBCNews*, January 22, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1775718.stm>.

However, this remained a political level attack – those arrested were simply members within the admittedly broad PAS organization, effectively political non-entities, and none were in the leadership circle. As Fadzil Noor said, “As far as we know there is no connection at all. If there is, it is based on the actions of individuals.”

The 2004 general election testified to PAS’s lost ground, the opposition’s failure to capitalise on reformasi, and the BN’s success in linking PAS to radical Islam and itself to “moderate”, progressive Islam. UMNO performed well in Malay-majority constituencies, with an average 10 percent increase in its support in these seats, though admittedly less than what it had received in 1995 pre-reformasi. By contrast, PAS dropped from 27 seats to just seven. PAS had clearly misunderstood the type of Islam desired by its Malay-Muslim constituency, with the elections instead reflecting an embrace of the Islam Hadhari agenda of the incumbent Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

Overall, the “terrorist” discourse is certainly being utilised by the government. However, this has not corresponded with a rise in arrests – rather the opposite is true. It can thus be deduced that the motive of the government in characterising and dealing with threats in these ways is a function of its continued emphasis on regime – particularly BN and UMNO – stability. The hypocrisy of the government noted by Johns above illustrates this clearly, as the law is not being applied consistently – it is only being applied in situations where there is a direct challenge to the Malay-dominant *regime* not to society as a whole. When members of this regime make racially provocative remarks they are not reprimanded – when outsiders to the regime make similar comments or protest, they are arrested or branded as “extremists” or “terrorists.” This policy helps protect the regime by not only eliminating political threats but, through the emphasis on racial elements, allowing the government to divide the people and score political points in various constituencies.

(2) Transnational co-operation

In the post-9/11 era, another notable alteration to Malaysia’s security approach has been its co-operation with other countries, primarily the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states and the US. This marked a departure from a security policy which historically has been limited to domestic concerns and mostly has not tolerated outside opinions let alone joint-policy making.

Illustrating this shift, the ASEAN states have formulated a common rhetorical position, signing a number of joint declarations, including the Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism (2001) and, with the US, the Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism (2002). Regional meetings on terrorism have become a regular occurrence. The military intelligence directors of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Brunei held an informal meeting in Kuala Lumpur in January 2002 to discuss intelligence sharing and the threat posed by regional terrorist networks. This marked the beginning of a series of such meetings. ASEAN’s foreign ministers likewise met in February 2002 to discuss regional collaboration on the issue. In May 2002, the 22nd meeting of the ASEAN Chief’s of National Police in Phnom Penh focused on addressing terrorism and other

transnational crimes – a focus which was then repeated at consecutive meetings in 2004, 2005 and 2007.

Representing a more dramatic shift in policy are the changes inherent in the relationship between Malaysia and the US. Bill Clinton's terms as United States President was one of increased strain for the US-Malaysia relationship, with the US openly criticising the Malaysian government, particularly on the issue of human rights. The Malaysian government saw the Clinton administrations' "liberal internationalist" agenda of human rights and open markets as a threat to the Malaysian political and economic form of governance. The deterioration of the relationship came to a head during the financial crisis and the detention and trial of Anwar Ibrahim. Vice-President Al Gore praised the call for reformasi and walked out of a dinner hosted by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Relations in the early months of the George W. Bush administration improved only slightly, mostly due to its realist outlook and desire to move away from interfering in the domestic spheres of other countries. Nonetheless, US State Department officials reportedly told Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid that a meeting between President Bush and Mahathir could take place only if there was progress on the Anwar case and the treatment of political opponents. Repeated attempts by the Malaysian government to curry favour with the new administration – such as by sending high-level emissaries to Washington D.C. three times in Bush's first nine months in office – were rebuffed on similar grounds.¹⁴

September 11 and the War on Terror changed this. Public statements by US officials against Malaysia's human rights record dwindled in number, with President Bush, for example, making no comment on this issue at the October 2001 APEC summit in Shanghai. Instead, praise was heaped upon the Mahathir administration. US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick stated, "Malaysia is a model", "a force in regional stability in both political and economic terms" and "an Islamic country that provides leadership."¹⁵ Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly, though noting the Anwar issue as a matter of concern, called Malaysia a "beacon of stability."¹⁶ Mahathir was also finally invited to visit the White House and meet with President Bush.

In addition to increased endorsement by the US at the rhetorical level, the bilateral relationship also improved in the area of defence cooperation. The aforementioned Declaration on Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism provided for increased intelligence sharing and improved liaison between Malaysia and the US's law-enforcement agencies. In May 2002, Malaysia's Defence Minister Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak revealed the depth of the defence relationship during a visit to Washington D.C. Describing the relationship as a "well-kept secret", Najib noted that the level of defence cooperation between the two countries, though strong in the decades prior, had "elevated" after 9/11. Among the achievements in this era, Najib listed America's "excellent access to Malaysian intelligence", Malaysia's protection of US ships in the Straits of Malacca, and Malaysia's granting of approval for the over

¹⁴ 'In the Name of Security: Counterterrorism and Human Rights Abuses Under Malaysia's Internal Security Act', *HumanRightsWatch*, 16 (2004): 44.

¹⁵ 'Malaysian objection to Afghan war will not harm ties – envoy', *Kyodo News*, October 16, 2001.

¹⁶ James Cotton, 'Southeast Asia after 11 September', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 15(2003): 162.

1,000 requests by the US for overflights.¹⁷ Despite the government's vocal opposition to that war, Malaysia allowed US military flyovers on a case-by-case basis during the US invasion of Afghanistan.¹⁸

The reason for America's sudden endorsement of the Malaysian administration clearly goes beyond the latter's support of the War on Terror. Evident in the comments of Zoellick and Kelly, Malaysia is seen as a model for other Islamic societies to emulate, with its moderate, relatively democratic form of state Islam.

On Malaysia's part, a key factor in its relationship with the US is its economic strength. The US is a highly valuable export market, a source of foreign direct investment (FDI), and technology – all essential components of growth for an economy geared towards achieving the goal of developed country status. The US is Malaysia's largest trading partner. The importance of the economic level of the relationship to Malaysia was demonstrated during negotiations on the Malaysia-US trade and investment framework agreement. These negotiations took place during a period when, at the political level, relations were at their worst – mid-2003, the beginning of America's Iraq campaign, much criticised and opposed by the Malaysian government.¹⁹

Although operationally close, Malaysia has sought to remain rhetorically distant from the US. Malaysia's vocal criticism of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and, most prominently, Iraq are the most public examples of this. In response to the latter conflict, Mahathir stated, "The fact that North Korea's open admission that it has weapons of mass destruction was met only with mild admonishment seems to prove that indeed [the Iraq War] is a war against Muslims" and that the invasion of Iraq "will simply anger more Muslims who see this as being anti-Muslim rather than anti-terror."²⁰ The reason for Malaysia's stance lies not only in its leading role in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), but also in domestic factors; any acknowledgement by the government of US influences would be akin to political suicide, particularly in regards to the Malay-Muslim constituency over which UMNO battles PAS for votes.

(3) The Vindication of the ISA?

A major difference between the contemporary era and previous periods is that, presently, Malaysia's security policy – namely the ISA – is no longer heavily criticised by other countries, many of whom have adopted controversial legislation in response to the terrorist threat since 9/11, such as the US PATRIOT ACT. Although this has not led to an increase in arrests, it nonetheless has strengthened the Malaysian

¹⁷ Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, 'U.S.-Malaysia Defense Cooperation: A Solid Success Story', *The Heritage Foundation*, May 3, 2002, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/HL742.cfm>.

¹⁸ Pamela Sodhy, 'US-Malaysian Relations during the Bush Administration: The Political, Economic, and Security Aspects', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 25(2003): 380-381.

¹⁹ H. E. S. Nesadurai, 'Malaysia and the United States: Rejecting Dominance, Embracing Engagement', (Working Paper No.72, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2004), 23.

²⁰ Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 254.

government's own justifications for continuing to use this component of its security apparatus.

Days after September 11, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah stated that the ISA had served its purpose in combating terrorism and that the government had made the right move in acting against the KMM. Later that month, Mahathir declared that countries which once accused Malaysia of being undemocratic because of its use of the ISA were now adopting similar legislation. After the Marriott bombing in Jakarta in 2003, Mahathir further enunciated that, prior to 9/11, "Malaysia was criticised and people said that we were cruel for detaining suspects. They don't know which is better, to have bombs explode first before making arrests, or to arrest first before bombs explode."²¹ Firm support for the ISA was continued in the Prime Ministership of Abdullah, who stated:

Implementation and enforcement of the ISA... has always been undertaken in the most decent moral conduct and with careful detail, to curb any element who jeopardises the security of the country. That is why the government only arrests someone under the ISA when there are solid reasons against the person, that they will endanger national security.²²

The United States, in particular, has praised ISA detentions in recent years as contributing to the global counter-terrorism effort. The US Attorney-General allegedly expressed support for the Act, endorsing its significance in the context of the PATRIOT ACT. In May 2002, a US official stated that Malaysia had not used the ISA for political purposes since 9/11, further sanctioning its usage.²³ There are two main reasons for the US backflip. First, the US wishes to legitimise the ruling BN regime, seeing it as a source of stability in a region of anarchy and shadowy terrorist networks. Second, America's own conduct in the War on Terror in terms of human rights has harmed its credibility when it comes to human rights advocacy. In particular, the US practice of indefinite detention without trial of terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay draws parallels to Malaysia's ISA practices and thus puts the US government in no position to criticise.²⁴ Indeed, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Mohamed Nazri claimed the US no longer criticises the ISA because of the Guantanamo issue.

This has ultimately created trouble for actors in Malaysia's civil society. Josef Roy Benedict of the Malaysian branch of Amnesty International, for example, has stated:

It's been harder for civil society to challenge [the government] now when countries like US/UK are putting in laws like this... In the past Malaysia was in a way a part of a minority compared to other countries who had these kinds of laws... Western countries don't have the moral high ground [they] used to have. That's the hard part now.

²¹ 'No adverse impact on economy, says PM', *New Straits Times*, August 8, 2003.

²² Human Rights Watch, 'Detained Without Trial: Abuse of Internal Security Act Detainees in Malaysia', *HumanRightsWatch*, Vol. 17, issue 9, 2005, p.26.

²³ Cotton, 'Southeast Asia after 11 September', 162.

²⁴ 'In the Name of Security', 43-44.

Whereas in the past we'd say 'look at this country', use as a model, now these countries have undermined human rights, renditions in the EU, Guantanamo Bay in the US.²⁵

Repackaging the Rhetorical Approach

In terms of security-related rhetoric, there was both continuity and change between the administrations of Mahathir and Abdullah. Internationally, Mahathir pushed for an understanding of the “root causes”, namely the Israel-Palestine conflict, and shunned the militarism of some of Malaysia’s allies, predominantly the US.²⁶ By contrast, Abdullah promised a kinder, gentler approach than that of his predecessor, asking the Malaysian populace to “work with me, not for me.” As already noted, the operational level of Malaysia’s security policy continued with minimal change. In terms of rhetoric on the issue of terrorism, there was also much continuity between the policies of the two Prime Ministers. Reflecting the staunch anti-extremist stance of Mahathir, Abdullah stated in his maiden speech as Prime Minister of the need to be firm against extremism, terrorism and militancy.²⁷ The “root causes” approach was likewise adopted. As in the Mahathir administration, Abdullah regarded Israel-Palestine as a crucial causal factor for international terrorism. The difference in the rhetoric of the two is therefore somewhat minimal – what is notable is the *form* in which the rhetoric was delivered. Although Mahathir certainly saw Malaysia as a “model” Muslim country, Abdullah’s Islam Hadhari took it one step further by crafting a broad philosophy designed to appeal to domestic Muslim and non-Muslim audiences as well as Muslim populations abroad. Abdullah had embraced Malaysia’s role as a leading Muslim country to the extent that he had repackaged the Malaysian brand of Islam into an exportable commodity.

The concept of Islam Hadhari is derived from the Islamisation policies of Mahathir in the 1980s. Deputy Prime Minister Najib, however, states that Islam Hadhari has been practiced by the Malaysian leadership since independence, claiming his own father, Prime Minister Tun Razak Hussein, had put the concept into practice through development programmes.²⁸ Whatever the case, the term Islam Hadhari was introduced by then-Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah in 2002 without fanfare. Islam Hadhari was then gradually fleshed out in a series of rallies leading up to the March 2004 elections and became an important campaign issue. The concept was clearly part of UMNO’s re-election strategy.

Islam Hadhari itself is comprised of 10 principles. The first principle is “Faith in and piety to Allah.” Although seemingly dismissive of the other religions in Malaysia, this principle also emphasises a belief in freedom of religion and the lack of compulsion in

²⁵ Josef Roy Benedict (Executive Director Amnesty International Malaysia) in discussion with the author, July 19, 2007.

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the rhetoric in the post-9/11 Mahathir years, see Chapter Six of my upcoming doctoral thesis. See also: Osman Bakar, ‘The Impact of the American War on Terror on Malaysian Islam’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 16(2005); Elina Noor, ‘Terrorism in Malaysia: Situation and Response’, in *Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific: Threat and Response*, ed. Rohan Gunaratna (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), and; Joseph Chinyong Liow, ‘The Mahathir administration’s war against Islamic militancy: operational and ideological challenges’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 58(2004).

²⁷ Bakar, ‘The Impact of the American War on Terror on Malaysian Islam’, 122.

²⁸ ‘Najib: Islam Hadhari not something new’, *New Straits Times*, December 14, 2004.

religion, as derived from the Quran. The fourth principle – “A vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge” – and the fifth – “Balanced and comprehensive economic development” – illustrate Islam Hadhari’s economic undertones. The fourth aims to face the challenges of globalisation, integrative knowledge, science and technological advancement through the production of human resources. The fifth seeks to combine “moral economic practices” with a “comprehensive economic development” approach. In short, these principles seek to put into practice Abdullah’s notion that “Islam is a religion for development.” The eighth principle is “Cultural and moral integrity.” This consists of internalising “high moral values” that “ensure prosperity, harmony and peace in a multi-racial society.” Moral development and economic development are seen as coinciding. The remaining principles of Islam Hadhari are: “a just and trustworthy government”; “A free and independent people”; “A good quality of life for the people”; “Protection of the rights of minority groups and women”; “Safeguarding the environment”, and; “Strong defence capabilities.”²⁹

The terms used are fairly general and as such could be applied in other contexts. This is a reflection of Abdullah’s disdain for literal teachings of Islamic religious texts, the Prime Minister indicating instead a preference for “taking into account the modern world in which we live.”³⁰ Joseph Liow argues that what is actually innovative about Islam Hadhari is the form of the idea, rather than its actual content. Liow contends that Abdullah had succeeded in expressing the state’s well-entrenched ideology in “readily identifiable and catchy Islamic terminology.”³¹

To explain and spread the Islam Hadhari philosophy, the government, via the Information Ministry’s Special Affairs Department, launched a five-year information campaign in the wake of the elections. Led by a 20-man panel made up of religious leaders, journalists, academics, lawyers and psychologists, the campaign involved 600 speakers disseminating information on the concept to the public through various forums. In 2007 Abdullah gave a RM50,000 cheque to each Member of Parliament, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, to create awareness of the project in their constituency. Although significant capital was thus spent promoting the concept, it is evident that the government itself did not fully embrace the concept. As noted by *de facto* opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in 2008, four years after the concept was fully articulated:

What is so Islamic about the Hadhari model when corruption is more endemic now? You detain people without trial. The media is also not free.³²

The government’s application of the Islam Hadhari philosophy on the operational level is therefore somewhat uneven. A question is raised as to whether the concept

²⁹ Abdullah Badawi, ‘Principle of Islam Hadhari’, *Official Website of Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia*, 2004,

<http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdbase.nsf/vIslamHadhari/6AB761E2215A9BD8482570830030EC27>.

³⁰ S. Mark Heim, ‘Malaysian model: A different kind of Islamic state’, *The Christian Century*, 121(2004), 31.

³¹ Joseph Liow, ‘The Politics Behind Malaysia’s Eleventh General Election’, *Asian Survey*, 45(2005), 920.

³² Andrew Ong, ‘Anwar: PM akin to a communist leader’, *Malaysiakini*, January 29, 2008 <http://malaysiakini.com/news/77599>.

was always merely a strategy for winning Malay votes whilst not alienating the non-Muslim community rather than a genuine attempt at transforming Islamic thinking at home and abroad.

Islam Hadhari was also utilised to justify subsequent government crackdowns on deviant sects, as well as to legitimise the existing coercive apparatus. In the aftermath of the 2004 election, the government began moving against one of its usual targets – Muslim sects operating outside the state’s Islamic project. In the weeks following the BN’s electoral success, 70 members of Tarikat Samaniah Ibrahim Bonjol, a Muslim sect, were arrested in Selangor by Islamic religious authorities. It was claimed the sect had a “casual” attitude towards prayer and marriage and considered the Quran to simply be a merely historical text. Such views clearly ran counter to the Islam Hadhari project which used as its foundation the Quran, viewed as a holy document. This thus accounts for the sect’s removal from the public sphere. Subsequent to the arrests, the state Menteri Besar Khir Toyo announced that he would act against the more than 60 “deviant” sects said to be operating in Selangor.³³ The BN believed it had been given a mandate in the elections – a nation-wide endorsement of Islam Hadhari – and was utilising it as a new ideological justification for the continued use of the government’s coercive apparatus.

In terms of domestic politics, then, the impact of Islam Hadhari is decidedly mixed. On the one hand, the concept was seemingly embraced by the population at large with the BN achieving a landslide electoral victory in 2004, an election in which Islam Hadhari was a major component. The government made some attempt to show Islam Hadhari was not a mere electoral ploy, spending significant funds to explain and spread the concept in the election’s aftermath. On the other hand, the contradictions within the government’s domestic policies led to the concept being all but cast aside. The long-term impact of Islam Hadhari appears to be twofold. First, it illustrated that the Muslim population – and perhaps the population in general – would support an interpretation of Islam that was consistently promoted as “moderate”, whether it was so or not. This fact was not missed by the opposition, PAS in particular. Second, it provided the government with a justification for the continued use of its coercive apparatus, as elements deemed as going against the “moderate” image the Abdullah administration sought to portray at home and abroad became more readily identifiable.

The international dimension of the Islam Hadhari agenda is somewhat more notable and consistent than its domestic counterpart. Despite the patchwork nature of Islam Hadhari’s domestic implementation, the first full term of the Abdullah administration saw Islam Hadhari promoted widely to international audiences, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In a sense, the product that was being “sold” was the UMNO model of development, at the core of which is its state-sanctioned version of Islam. Islam Hadhari was portrayed as a model for Muslim development, nationally, internationally and spiritually, as well as an ideological counter to the extremist ideologies of al-Qaeda and its various cells.

A primary function of Islam Hadhari was to solidify Malaysia’s place as a model Muslim nation and leader of the Islamic world. With Malaysia presiding over the OIC

³³ Leslie Lau, ‘Backed by Muslims, KL takes on extremists’, *The Straits Times*, April 6, 2004.

under Abdullah, Islam Hadhari allowed the prime minister to internationalise UMNO's religious credentials.³⁴ Although acknowledging that Islam Hadhari was not a "one-size-fits-all" solution, Abdullah emphasised that Malaysia nonetheless provided an insight into how to successfully build a "progressive and modern Muslim nation."³⁵ The very vagueness of the Islam Hadhari concept and its principles has allowed for the attempted internationalisation of the UMNO model.

In fact, in 2004, before the elections were held, Abdullah stated that several countries expressed an interest in Islam Hadhari and a desire to adapt it to their circumstances.³⁶ In the years that followed this statement, however, there are only a few examples of countries indicating an interest in Islam Hadhari, let alone actually implementing it. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India stated that his country shared Malaysia's view of Islam as a "civilisational force" and described Islam Hadhari as "timely and necessary."³⁷ In 2006, Brunei also expressed an interest in the Islam Hadhari approach.³⁸ There is little indication that these statements are more than mere rhetorical support as it does not appear that either country has since put Islam Hadhari into practice. Islam Hadhari proved more successful at the OIC, with it being incorporated into the Makkah Declaration and the summit's joint communiqué in 2005.³⁹

In terms of the wider War on Terror, the concept has had more, albeit limited, success. During a working visit to Malaysia in 2005, Robert Zoellick, now US Deputy Secretary of State, was briefed on Islam Hadhari. Of particular interest to Zoellick was the concept's applicability to the situation in Iraq and whether the Malaysian government could use its experience to help. US image builder Karen Hughes reaffirmed this during a visit to Malaysia later that year. Hughes stated that the BN model provided an "outstanding" model of governance for Iraq. Hughes secured a pledge from Malaysia to spread Islam Hadhari to help fight terrorism in Iraq, stating, "Islam Hadhari has a powerful message of inclusion and tolerance."⁴⁰ Other Middle Eastern countries have reportedly also invited Malaysia to describe the concept.

Ultimately, Islam Hadhari signals not just philosophical attempt to combat extremism within the Muslim world, but provides to the rest of the world, the West in particular, an image of Islam that counters the rhetoric of extremists. Abdullah denies this:

³⁴ Khoo Boo Teik, 'The house of the rising sons: What they didn't debate at the UMNO general assembly', *Aliran Monthly*, 2004, <http://www.aliran.com/oldsite/monthly/2004b/9c.html>.

³⁵ 'Malaysian PM Takes 'Islam Hadhari' to India', *Islam Online*, December 22, 2004, <http://www.islamonline.net/English/News/2004-12/22/article03.shtml>.

³⁶ 'PM reveals foreign interest in Islam Hadhari', *Bernama Daily Malaysian News*, February 18, 2004.

³⁷ 'Islam as a civilisational force, India shares Malaysia's vision', *Hindustan Times*, December 22, 2004.

³⁸ 'Brunei keen on Malaysia's 'Islam Hadhari' Concept', *Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies*, July 5, 2006.

³⁹ Zubaidah Abu Bakar, 'Civilisational Islam' approach accepted', *New Straits Times*, December 9, 2005.

⁴⁰ Leslie Lau, 'Malaysia the way to go for Iraq, says US image czar', *The Straits Times*, October 26, 2005.

It is not an approach to pacify the West. It is neither an approach to apologise for the perceived Islamic threat, nor an approach to seek approval from the non-Muslims for a more friendly and gentle image of Islam. It is an approach that seeks to make Muslims understand that progress is enjoined by Islam.⁴¹

However, there is much suggesting otherwise, that Islam Hadhari is more than a mere philosophy to be emulated by other Muslim countries. For example, Abdullah later stated that there was a noticeable difference in the tone and views of non-Muslim communities overseas after 9/11 when compared to their views after the Islam Hadhari concept was explained to them. Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar also noted that several European countries saw Islam Hadhari as a useful “platform” to foster more effective relations. Islam Hadhari ultimately allows Malaysia to position itself as a model Muslim society, one which counters the view prevalent in the West of Islam as radical and backward. The post-September 11 world increased the international stakes for a moderate Islam and Islam Hadhari provided the response. Islam Hadhari is an attempt to reclaim Islam’s image and, in Abdullah’s words, “to extricate the Islamic world from this crisis and to help the process of rehabilitating ourselves to restore Islam’s past glory.”⁴²

Conclusions

Malaysia’s post-9/11 security policy has featured some notable alterations. First, threats are now defined within the context of international terrorism. The rhetoric of “terrorism” has been used to legitimate government policies against bloggers, as well as more traditional “threats” such as ethnic instability and political opposition. The term “terrorist” has been used by the government in prior periods – most significantly, the 1948-1960 Emergency era – but its usage in the post-9/11 climate brings up a whole new set of feelings to both domestic and international audiences and thus provokes a different reaction. The War on Terror has therefore provided a new set of justifications for the continued existence of Malaysia’s coercive apparatus.

Second, transnational co-operation has increased. This is particularly significant as Malaysia has traditionally kept its domestic and external spheres separate with minimal overlap. The relationship with ASEAN has become somewhat deeper with greater security co-operation, while relations with the US have improved drastically. Although Malaysia has ensured it remains politically distant from the US so as to not provoke a domestic backlash, it has nonetheless provided strong support to the American War on Terror, overtly and covertly.

Third, and finally, the ISA is now comparatively seldom criticised by the international community. Much derided before 9/11, particularly by the US under President Clinton, the post-9/11 world saw a shift in the outlook of many of the ISA’s critics. Malaysia is now seen as a source of stability in the region and in the Muslim world. Moreover, many of the states once critical of the ISA have now adopted legislation and campaigns seen as undermining human rights and have thus lost the moral high ground.

⁴¹ Abdullah Badawi, ‘Islam Hadhari in a multi-racial society’ (speech, Asia Society of Australia, Sydney, April 8, 2005).

⁴² Abdullah Badawi, ‘UMNO’s 57th Annual General Assembly’, (speech, UMNO 57th General Assembly, Kuala Lumpur, November 15, 2006).

In terms of Malaysia's "hearts and minds" strategy, the Malaysian government has continued its staunch opposition to extremism in all its forms but has done so in a new format. The creation of Islam Hadhari marked an overt attempt by Malaysia to "sell" its brand of development, to present a moderate face to a world that had become increasingly wary of Islam. At the domestic level, however, Islam Hadhari has had an uneven implementation, with the Abdullah government itself accused of practices which go against the very foundations of the philosophy.

On the whole, though, Malaysia's security apparatus is largely the same as its original formulation in the Emergency years: an operational level comprised of repressive legislation combined with a "hearts and minds" rhetorical component. However, the contradictions between the two components are become more readily apparent, most notably with the values of Islam Hadhari in seemingly direct contradiction to the restrictions imposed by government on civil society. The apparatus has helped sustain the UMNO-BN project for over 50 years. However, following the 2008 election results, the BN faces the very real prospect of being in opposition for the first time. As such, it is unclear what changes, if any, will be made to its security approach and whether the definition of threat will be further extended to ensure the continued survival of the BN regime.