

Malaysian-Saudi Relations: A Lesson in the Pitfalls of Authoritarianism and Autocracy

By [James M. Dorsey](#)

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Embattled former Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak was the main loser in last month's election upset that returned Mahathir Mohamad to power as his country's anti-corruption crusader. Yet, Mr. Razak is not the only one who may be paying the price for allegedly non-transparent and unaccountable governance.

So is Saudi Arabia with a Saudi company having played a key role in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal in which Mr. Razak is suspected to have overseen the siphoning off of at least US\$4.5 billion and the Saudi government seemingly having gone out of its way to provide him political cover.

While attention has focussed largely on the [re-opening of the investigation of Mr. Razak](#) and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, both of whom have been banned from travel abroad and have seen their homes raided by law enforcement, Saudi Arabia has not escaped policymakers' consideration. Mr. Razak has denied all allegations of wrongdoing.

The geopolitical fallout of the scandal is becoming increasingly evident. Defence Minister Mohamad Sabu suggested this week that [Malaysia was re-evaluating the presence of Malaysian troops in Saudi Arabia](#), dispatched to the kingdom as part of the 41-nation, Saudi-sponsored Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC).

"The ATM (Malaysian Armed Forces) presence in Saudi Arabia has indirectly mired Malaysia in the Middle East conflict... The government will make a decision on the matter in the near future after a re-evaluation has been completed," said Mr. Sabu, who is known for his critical view of Saudi Arabia.

In a commentary published late last year that suggests a potential Malaysian re-alignment of its Middle Eastern relationships, Mr. Sabu noted that Saudi wrath has been directed "oddly, (at) Turkey, Qatar, and Iran...three countries that have undertaken some modicum of political and economic reforms. Instead of encouraging all sides to work together, Saudi Arabia has gone on an offensive in Yemen, too. Therein [the danger posed to Malaysia](#): if Malaysia is too close to Saudi Arabia, Putrajaya would be asked to choose a side."

Putrajaya, a city south of Kuala Lumpur, is home to the prime minister's residence.

Mr. Sabu went on to say that

"Malaysia should not be too close to a country whose internal politics are getting toxic... For the lack of a better word, Saudi Arabia is a cesspool of constant rivalry among the princes. By this token, it is also a vortex that could

suck any country into its black hole if one is not careful. Indeed, Saudi Arabia is governed by hyper-orthodox Salafi or Wahhabi ideology, where Islam is taken in a literal form. Yet true Islam requires understanding Islam, not merely in its Quranic form, but Quranic spirit.”

Since coming to office, Mr. Sabu has said that he was also [reviewing plans for a Saudi-funded anti-terrorism centre](#), the King Salman Centre for International Peace (KSCIP), which was allocated 16 hectares of land in Putrajaya by the Razak government. Mr. Sabu was [echoing statements by Mr. Mahathir](#) before the election.

Compounding potential strains in relations with Saudi Arabia, Seri Mohd Shukri Abdull, Mr. Mahathir’s newly appointed anti-corruption czar, who resigned from the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) in 2016 as a result [of pressure to drop plans to indict Mr. Razak](#), noted that

“we have had [difficulties dealing with Arab countries](#) (such as)...Saudi Arabia...”

The investigation is likely to revisit 1MDB relationship’s with [Saudi energy company PetroSaudi International Ltd](#), owned by Saudi businessman Tarek Essam Ahmad Obaid as well as prominent members of the kingdom’s ruling family who allegedly funded Mr. Razak.

DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD

14th November 2017

Dear brothers in Islam in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

Dear brothers in Islam in Yemen, be they Shiah or Sunni


As a Muslim I and many Malaysian Muslims and non-Muslim would like to appeal to our dear brothers to stop fighting this terrible war. Already thousands have died and a million Yemeni children are starving to death.

With the deaths and destruction there will be no winners. Only losers. Have mercy on the innocent people who have become the victims of this war.

The world is appalled over this man-made tragedy. Muslims feel ashamed. Please stop this senseless slaughter. At the very least please allow food and medicine to be delivered to the starving and sick people of Yemen.

I would like to appeal to Muslims worldwide to be true to Islam and to do all we can to stop this war.

*Please accept the expressions
of my highest consideration.*


Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad
Former Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003)

No. 1, Jalan P8H, Presint 8, 62250 PUTRAJAYA
Tel : 603-8885 8900 Fax : 603-8889 1114

It will not have been lost on Saudi Arabia that Mr. Mahathir met with [former PetroSaudi executive and whistle blower Xavier Andre Justo](#) less than two weeks after his election victory.

A three-part BBC documentary, [The House of Saud: A Family at War](#), suggested that Mr. Razak had worked with Prince Turki bin Abdullah, the son of former Saudi King Abdullah, to syphon off funds from 1MDB.

[Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir](#) came to Mr. Razak's rescue in 2016 by declaring that

US\$681 million transferred into the prime minister's personal bank account was a "genuine donation with nothing expected in return."

The Malaysian election as well as seeming Saudi complicity in the corruption scandal that toppled Mr. Razak has global implications, particularly for the United States and China, global powers who see support of autocratic and/or corrupt regimes as the best guarantee to maintain stability.

It is a lesson that initially was apparent in the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

The rollback of the achievements of most of those revolts backed by autocratic leaders in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates bent on reshaping the Middle East and North Africa in their mould has contributed to the mayhem, violence and brutal repression engulfing the region.

In addition, autocratic rule has failed to squash widespread economic and social discontent. Middle Eastern states, including Algeria, [Morocco](#), Egypt, Lebanon Iran, and most recently [Jordan](#) have [witnessed protests against rising prices, cuts in public spending and corruption](#).

"The public dissatisfaction, bubbling up in several countries, is a reminder that even more urgent action is needed," warned [Christine Lagarde, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#).

Elections, if held at all, more often than not fail to serve as a corrective in the Middle East and North Africa because they are engineered rather than a free and fair reflection of popular will. Elections in countries like Iraq and Lebanon serve as exceptions that confirm the rule while Iran represents a hybrid.

As a result, street protests, militancy and violence are often the only options available to those seeking change.

Against that backdrop, Malaysia stands out as an example of change that does not jeopardize stability.

It is but the latest example of Southeast Asian nations having led the way in producing relatively peaceful political transitions starting with the 1986 popular revolt in the Philippines, the 1998 toppling of Suharto in Indonesia, and Myanmar's 2010 transition away from military dictatorship.

This is true even if Southeast Asia also demonstrates that political transition is a decades-long process that marches to the tune of Vladimir Lenin's principle of two steps forward, one step backwards as it witnesses a backslide with the rise in the Philippines of President Rodrigo Duterte's authoritarianism, stepped up jihadist activity, the 2014 military coup in Thailand, increasingly autocratic rule in Cambodia, the rise of conservatism and intolerance in Indonesia, and the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

If anything, Malaysia constitutes an anti-dote.

"Malaysia's institutions proved more resilient...and descent into authoritarianism has been averted - [offering a lesson not only to aspiring](#)

[dictators, but to those in the United States](#) who argue that propping up corrupt leaders is in U.S. interests," said Alex Helan, a security and anti-corruption consultant.

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This article was also published on [The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer](#).

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the [New Books in Middle Eastern Studies](#) podcast. James is the author of [The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer](#) blog, a [book](#) with the same title as well as [Comparative Political Transitions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa](#), co-authored with Dr. Teresita Cruz-Del Rosario, [Shifting Sands, Essays on Sports and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa](#), and the forthcoming [China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom](#)

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