

US Attempting “Regime Change” in Malaysia: Fact or Fiction?

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As the South-East Asian nation of Malaysia prepares for general elections, distrust of the political opposition and accusations of foreign interference have been major talking points in the political frequencies emanating from Kuala Lumpur. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) leads the country’s ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, and has maintained power since Malaysian independence in 1957. One of Malaysia’s most recognizable figures is former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who has been credited with ushering in large-scale economic growth and overseeing the nation’s transition from an exporter of palm oil, tin, and other raw materials, into an industrialized economy that manufactures automobiles and electronic goods.

The opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, is headed by Anwar Ibrahim, who once held the post of Deputy Prime Minister in Mahathir’s administration, but was sacked over major disagreements on how to steer Malaysia’s economy during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Today, the political climate in Malaysia is highly polarized and a sense of unpredictability looms over the nation. Malaysia’s current leader, Prime Minister Najib Razak, has pursued a reform-minded agenda by repealing authoritarian legislation of the past and dramatically loosening controls on expression and political pluralism introduced under Mahathir’s tenure. Najib has rolled back Malaysia’s Internal Security Act, which allowed for indefinite detention without trial, and has liberalized rules regarding the publication of books and newspapers. During Malaysia’s 2008 general elections, the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition experienced its worst result in decades, with the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition winning 82 parliamentary seats. For the first time, the ruling party was deprived of its two-thirds parliamentary majority, which is required to pass amendments to Malaysia’s Federal Constitution. In the run-up to elections scheduled to take place before an April 2013 deadline, figures from all sides of the political spectrum are asking questions about the opposition’s links to foreign-funders in Washington.



Protestors form a human chain in the city center of Kuala Lumpur during April 2012 protests in support of the Bersih coalition.

The question of foreign-funding

Malaysia's former PM Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has long captured the ire of officials from Washington and Tel Aviv, and though he's retired, he has channeled his energies into the Perdana Global Peace Foundation, which recently hosted an international conference in Kuala Lumpur calling for a new investigation into the events of 9/11 and has sought to investigate war crimes committed in Gaza, Iraq and Afghanistan. Mahathir has been an ardent critic of Israel and organizations such as AIPAC, and has recently accused US-based organizations the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Open Society Institute (OSI) of holding a concealed intention to influence Malaysia's domestic politics through the funding of local NGOs and groups directly linked to Anwar Ibrahim's Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition.

In an article the former prime minister published in the New Straits Times, a leading mainstream newspaper, [Mahathir accuses financier George Soros](#) and his organization, the Open Society Institute, of "promoting democracy" in Eastern Europe to pave the way for colonization by global finance capital. Mahathir acknowledges how OSI pumped millions into opposition movements and independent media in Hungary, Ukraine and Georgia under the guise of strengthening civil society, only to have like-minded individuals nominated by Soros's own foundation come to power in those countries.

The former prime minister [has also pointed to how](#) Egypt (prior to Mohamad Morsi taking power) has cracked down on NGOs affiliated with NED, namely groups such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and Freedom House, which are all recipients of funding from the US State Department. In Malaysia, high-profile NGOs and media outlets have admittedly received funding from OSI and satellite organizations of NED. Premesh Chandran, the CEO of the nation's most prominent alternative media outlet, Malaysiakini, is a grantee of George Soros's Open Society Foundations and launched the news organization with a \$100,000 grant from the Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), another organization with dubious affiliations to the US State Department.

Malaysiakini has [come under pressure](#) from local journalists for the lack of transparency in its financial management and hesitance in revealing the value of its shares. Additionally, Suaram, an NGO promoting human rights, has borne heavy criticism over its funding and

organizational structure. The Companies Commission of Malaysia [launched investigations](#) into Suara Inisiatif Sdn Bhd, a private company linked to Suaram, and found it to be a conduit for money being used to channel funds from NED. Suaram has been instrumental in legitimizing allegations of a possible cover-up of the murder of a Mongolian fashion model, Altantuya Shaaribuu, who was living in Malaysia in 2006 and associated with government officials that have been linked to a kickback scandal involving the government's purchase of submarines from France. Senator Ezam Mohd Nor, himself a recipient of Suaram's Human Rights Award, [has accused](#) the organization of employing poor research methods and attempting to disparage the government:

"Malaysians have the right to feel suspicious about them. They have been making personal allegations against the Prime Minister [Najib Razak] on the murder of Altantuya and many other cases without proof... their motive is very questionable especially when they are more inclined towards ridiculing and belittling the ruling government."

The German Embassy in KL has [reportedly admitted](#) that it has provided funds to Suaram's project in 2010. Malaysia's Foreign Minister Anifah Aman followed by making strong statements to the German Ambassador and declared that Germany's actions could be viewed as interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state.

Since 2007, Bersih, an association of NGOs calling itself the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, staged three street protests in which thousands of yellow-clad demonstrators took to the streets in Kuala Lumpur demanding electoral reform. After coming under heavy scrutiny for obfuscating funding sources, Bersih coalition leader Ambiga Sreenevasan [admitted](#) that her organization receives funding from the National Democratic Institute and the Open Society Institute. Sreenevasan herself has been the recipient of the US State Department's Award for International Women of Courage, and [was present in](#) Washington DC in 2009 to receive the award directly from the hands of Michelle Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. While Sreenevasan's organization claimed to be non-partisan and apolitical, members of Malaysia's political opposition openly endorsed the movement, and some were even present at the demonstrations.

Anatomy of Malaysia's political opposition

Malaysia is a multi-cultural and multi-religious state, and both the ruling and opposition parties attempt to represent the nation's three largest ethnic groups. Approximately 60 per cent of Malaysians are either ethnic Malay or other indigenous groups and are mostly listed as Muslim, while another 25 per cent are ethnic Chinese who are predominantly Buddhist, with 7 per cent mostly Hindu Indian-Malaysians. The United Malays National Organization, the Malaysian Chinese Association, and the Malaysian Indian Congress head Barisan Nasional. The opposition, Pakatan Rakyat, currently controls four state governments and is led by Anwar Ibrahim's Keadilan Rakyat, the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP), and staunchly Islamist Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).

While a large percentage of urbanites with legitimate grievances are quick to acknowledge the government's shortcomings, many are hesitant to back Anwar Ibrahim due to his connections with neo-conservative thinkers in Washington and general disunity within the opposition. Ibrahim maintains close ties with senior US officials and organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy. In 2005, Ibrahim chaired the Washington-based

Foundation for the Future, established and funded by the US Department of State at the behest of Elizabeth Cheney, the daughter of then-Vice President Dick Cheney, thanks in large part to his cozy relationship with Paul Wolfowitz.

While Ibrahim was on trial for allegedly engaging in sodomy with a male aide (something he was later acquitted of), Wolfowitz and former US Vice-President Al Gore [authored a joint opinion piece](#) in the Wall Street Journal in support of Ibrahim, while the Washington Post published [an editorial](#) calling for consequences that would affect Malaysia's relations with Washington if Ibrahim was to be found guilty. Ibrahim enraged many when [he stated that he would](#) support policy to protect the security of Israel in an interview with the Wall Street Journal; this is particularly controversial in Malaysia, where support for Palestine is largely unanimous. Malaysian political scientist Dr. Chandra Muzaffar [writes](#):

“It is obvious that by acknowledging the primacy of Israeli security, Anwar was sending a clear message to the deep state and to Tel Aviv and Washington that he is someone that they could trust. In contrast, the Najib government, in spite of its attempts to get closer to Washington, remains critical of Israeli aggression and intransigence. Najib has described the Israeli government as a ‘serial killer’ and a ‘gangster’”.

Members of Barisan Nasional [have addressed](#) Ibrahim's connections to the National Endowment for Democracy in the Malaysian Parliament, including his participation in NED's 'Democracy Award' event held in Washington DC in 2007. Independent journalists have [uncovered letters](#) written by Anwar Ibrahim, two of which were sent to NED President Carl Gershman in Washington DC that discussed sending an international election observer team to Malaysia and general issues related to electoral reform. A third letter was sent to George Soros, expressing interest in collaborating with an accountability firm headed by Ibrahim. Pakatan Rakyat's Communications Director, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, [verified](#) the authenticity of the documents. This should come as little surprise, as Ibrahim's economic policies have historically aligned with institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, in contrast to Mahathir, whose protectionist economic policies opposed international financial institutions and allowed Malaysia to navigate and largely resurface from the 1997 Asian financial crisis unscathed.

An issue that concerns secular and non-Muslim Malaysian voters is the role of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) as part of the opposition. In sharp contrast to the moderate brand of Islam preached by UMNO, the organization's primary objective is the founding of an Islamic state. The PAS has spoken of working within the framework of Malaysia's parliamentary democracy, but holds steadfast to implementing sharia law on a national scale, which would lead to confusing implications for Malaysia's sizable non-Muslim population. The debate around the implementation of Islamic hudud penal code is something that other Pakatan Rakyat coalition members, such as figures in the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party, have been unable to agree on. The PAS enjoys support from rural Malay Muslims in conservative states such as Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu in northern Malaysia, though they have very limited appeal to urbanites. While certain individuals in PAS have raised questions about NGOs receiving foreign funding, Mahathir has [insinuated](#) that PAS's leadership has been largely complicit:

“They [foreign interests] want to topple the government through the demonstration and Nik Aziz [Spiritual leader of PAS] said it is permissible to

bring down the government in this manner. They want to make Malaysia like Egypt, Tunisia, which were brought down through riots and now Syria.... when the government does not fall, they [Pakatan Rakyat] can appeal to the foreign power to help and bring down, even if it means using fire power.”



Despite claims of being non-partisan and unaffiliated with any political party, the country’s main opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, fully endorsed the Bersih movement.

Feasibility of ‘regime change’ narrative

It must be acknowledged that the current administration led by Prime Minister Najib Razak has made great strides toward improving relations with Washington. [At a meeting](#) with President Barack Obama in 2010, Najib offered Malaysia’s assistance to cooperate with the United States to engage the Muslim world; Najib also expressed willingness to deploy Malaysian aid personnel to Afghanistan, and allegedly agreed on the need to maintain a unified front on Iran’s nuclear program. Najib has employed a Washington-based public relations firm, APCO, to improve Malaysia’s image in the US and has seemingly embraced American economic leadership of the region [through his support](#) for the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement. Some would argue that Najib is perhaps the most pro-American leader Malaysia has ever had – a stark contrast to the boldness of Mahathir. Despite Najib having good rapport with formal Western leaders, it is clear with whom the thank-tank policy architects, Zionist lobbies, and foundation fellows have placed their loyalties.

Sentiment among Malaysia’s youth and “pro-democracy” activists, who constitute a small but vocal minority, tend to be entirely dismissive of the ‘regime change’ narrative, viewing it as pre-election diversionary rhetoric of the ruling party. While bogeymen of the Zionist variety are often invoked in Malaysian political discourse, it would be negligent to ignore the effects of Washington-sponsored ‘democracy promotion’ in the global context, which have in recent times cloaked mercenary elements and insurgents in the colors of freedom fighting, and successfully masked geopolitical restructuring and the ushering in of neo-liberal capitalism with the hip and fashionable vigor of ‘people power’ coups. As the United States continues to militarily increase its presence in the Pacific region in line with its strategic policy-shift to East Asia, policy makers in Washington would like to see compliant heads of state who will act to further American interests in the ASEAN region.

Let's not ignore the elephant in the room; the real purpose of America's resurgence of interest in the ASEAN bloc is to fortify the region as a counterweight against Beijing. The defense ministries of Malaysia and China held a landmark defense and security consultation in September 2012, in addition to frequent bilateral state visits and enhanced economic cooperation. It was the father of the current leader, Malaysia's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, who made the landmark visit to Beijing to normalize relations in 1974, and under his son Najib, Sino-Malaysian relations and cooperation have never been better. Following the global economic crisis of 2008, Najib looked to Beijing to revive Malaysia's export oriented economy, emphasizing increased Chinese investment into Malaysia and expanding the base of Sino-Malaysian trade in areas like education and student exchange, finance, infrastructure development, science and technology, yielding lucrative and mutually beneficial results. China has been Malaysia's largest trade partner, with trade figures reaching US\$90 billion in 2011; Malaysia is China's largest trading partner among ASEAN nations.

In asking the question of regime change in Malaysia, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar [reflects on](#) Washington's moves to bolster its military muscle and dominance over the Asia-Pacific region:

"Establishing a military base in Darwin [Australia], resurrecting the US' military alliance with the Philippines, coaxing Japan to play a more overt military role in the region, instigating Vietnam to confront China over the Spratly Islands, and encouraging India to counterbalance Chinese power, are all part and parcel of the larger US agenda of encircling and containing China. In pursuing this agenda, the US wants reliable allies - not just friends - in Asia. In this regard, Malaysia is important because of its position as a littoral state with sovereign rights over the Straits of Malacca, which is one of China's most critical supply routes that transports much of the oil and other materials vital for its economic development. Will the containment of China lead to a situation where the hegemon, determined to perpetuate its dominant power, seek to exercise control over the Straits in order to curb China's ascendancy? Would a trusted ally in Kuala Lumpur facilitate such control? The current Malaysian leadership does not fit the bill."

'Backwards' and forwards

Pakatan Rakyat, the main opposition coalition pitted against the ruling party, has yet to offer a fully coherent organizational program, and if the coalition ever came to power, the disunity of its component parties and their inability to agree on fundamental policies would be enough to conjure angrier, disenchanting youth back on to the streets, in larger numbers perhaps. What is ticklishly ironic about reading op-eds penned by the likes of Wolfowitz and Al Gore, and how they laud Malaysia as a progressive and moderate model Islamic state, is that they concurrently demonize its leadership and dismiss them authoritarian thugs. Surely, the ruling coalition has its shortcomings; the politicization of race and religion, noted cases of corrupt officials squandering funds, etc. - but far too few, especially those of the middle-class who benefit most from energy subsidies, acknowledge the tremendous economic growth achieved under the current leadership and the success of their populist policies. Najib's administration would do well to place greater emphasis on addressing the concerns of Malaysia's minorities who view affirmative action policies given to Malay ethnicities as disproportionate; income status, not ethnicity, should be a deciding factor in who receives assistance. The current administration appears set to widen populist policies that make necessities affordable through subsidies and continue to assist low-income

earners with cash handouts.

Najib has acknowledged the need for broad reforms of Malaysia's state-owned enterprises over concerns that crony capitalism may deter foreign investment; this should be rolled out concurrently with programs to foster more local entrepreneurship. To put it bluntly, the opposition lacks confidence from the business community and foreign investors; even the likes of JP Morgan [have issued statements](#) of concern over an opposition win. It should be noted that if Islamists ever wielded greater influence in Malaysia under an opposition coalition, one could imagine a sizable exodus of non-Muslim minorities and a subsequent flight of foreign capital, putting the nation's economy in a fragile and fractured state. And yet, the United States has poured millions into 'democracy promotion' efforts to strengthen the influence of NGOs that distort realities and cast doubt over the government's ability to be a coherent actor.

Malaysia does not have the kind of instability that warrants overt external intervention; backing regime-change efforts may only go so far as supporting dissidents and groups affiliated with Anwar Ibrahim. No matter the result of the upcoming elections, Najib appears to have played ball enough for Washington to remain more or less neutral. According to Bersih coalition leader Ambiga Sreenevasan, Malaysia's electoral process is so restrictive that a mass movement like Bersih is required to purge the system of its backwardness. These are curious statements, considering that the opposition gained control of four out of 13 states in 2008, including Selangor, a key economic state with the highest GDP and most developed infrastructure. [In response](#), Najib has adhered to Bersih's demands and has called for electoral reform, forming a parliamentary select committee comprising members from both Pakatan Rakyat and Barisan Nasional. As elections loom, Bersih coalition leader Ambiga Sreenavasan is [already dubbing](#) them "the dirtiest elections ever seen" - unsurprising rhetoric from a woman being handed her talking points by the US embassy.

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