**Malaysian counter-terror strategy: Nation security or Regime security**

**Introduction**

Malaysia's counter-terror effort, as well as in many other countries with authoritarian regimes, is also used for ensuring the regime's security and stability. The main goal of this essay is to explain how Malaysian government has been misusing global terror obsession for its particular aims. The essay attempts to find an answer to whether terms of national security and regime security are synonyms for Malaysian government. For this, it is necessary to analyze regime’s approach not only to security threat posed by Islamic radicalization and terrorist groups, but also its relations with internal or external actors.

**Malaysian political environment**

September 2001 provided Malaysian ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) with an opportunity to reduce EU's and U.S.'s criticism of misusing ISA (Internal Security Act), an act originally introduced to help fight communist insurgency, which  have been extensively used for harassment of political opponents. For Malaysian government, regime security means to delegitimize its political rivals. The religious or Islamic opposition is considered as a radical for its ties with terrorist organizations such as Al-Kaida or Jemmah Islamiyah. The liberal and secular opposition is labelled as perverted. The leader of People's Justice Party and former Deputy of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was accused of corruption and homosexuality. This situation have paradoxically resulted in co-operation between Islamic and liberal opposition. There are also other mistakes of the government that were made in order to stop growing influence of radical Islam in Malaysia. Since the 1970s, the country has been experiencing inflow of finances for Wahhabist and Salafits movements and groups that were previously marginal in predominately Sufi Malaysia and especially strong among Malaysian royal families and elites of UMNO. In order to create an alternative to the new groups, in 1980s government pushed for Islamization of the country. Regime elites sought to portray Malaysia as a moderate Islamic state. This declaration should appease Malaysian minorities, especially Malaysian Chinese, who represent economical elite of the country. Moreover, the bureaucratic apparatus saw significant expansion of departments in charge of Islamic affairs (Hamayotsu, 2010: 167-168). UMNO led government started to promote state-sponsored version of Islam, known as Islam Hadhari, introduced to combat Islamic extremism and deviant religious practices and win hearts and minds of Malay Muslim population for Mahathir’s vision of moderate and "progressive" Islamic state. The new "state church" is under direct control of government and should help it to control Islamic school and charities (Humphry, 2010: 33-34). Ironically, the state interference with Muslim religious affairs helped radical elements within PAS and Islamic groups to seize more power. Islam Hadhari has de-facto monopolized charities that provide welfare services to lower class of Malay Muslim population, and the only way for this groups to maintain support of „Malay Muslim street“ is to call for more Islam in public life and politics (Humphry, 2010: 35). This call for "more Islam" means call for "too much Islam" for Malaysian racial and religious minorities. It is no surprise that this situation led to rising tension between Malay Muslim majority and minorities and was used by Islamic radicals as pretext for attacks on Christian churches. The other source of radicalization was escalation of conflict in southern Thailand, largely inhabited by Malaysian Muslims. There were also serious threats, that in the conflict engaged jihadist groups would use Malaysian territory as their base for cross-border assaults on Thai forces. This situation put Malaysian government into invidious situation. Islamic opposition called for action against Thailand, but government preferred to pursue non-interference policy, a fundamental rule of ASEAN. UMNO led government found itself in a similarly complicated situation after U.S. declared War on Terror (Funston, 2010).

**Terrorist activities**

In Malaysia, there is also religiously motivated violence against Christians and Hindus. In these attacks participated local Islamic groups that received "moral support" from Jemmah Islamiyah and Al-Kaida. These terrorist organizations reportedly planned their operations in Malaysia and local Islamic militant group Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) had ties with prominent members of Al-Kaida, i.e. Zacarias Moussaoui who spent few months in Malaysia as a guest of KMM leaders. A local Islamist militant group with links to Al-Kaida also planned attack on U.S. military personnel in Malaysia, but Malaysian authorities claim that there is no evidence for its activity in the country before 9/11 (Sohdy, 2003: 368, 377).

In reality, Malaysia was for a long time benevolent towards presence of Islamic radicals and insurgents from neighbouring countries on its soil as a form of revenge for Pilipino and Indonesian claims on Malaysian part of Borneo. Since 1960s, Malaysia has provided extensive material support for Muslim resistance groups in the Philippines and in the 1980s granted asylum for Indonesian militants, who later participated in establishing of Jemmah Islamiyah. In late 1980s, these groups established their operational headquarters in Malaysia (Funston, 2010: 239). The one of main activities of the groups was recruitment of young Malaysians for Jihad against Soviet Union in the Soviet-Afghan War (1979 - 1989). These men later represented the first generation of Malaysian jihadists (Gunatatna, 2003: 119). As a cover up for such activities, religious schools and other institutions were established and directed by JI leaders Abu Bakar Bashir and Abdullah Sungkar (Ramakrina, 2005: 35). Malaysia, as well as Indonesia, played and still play an important role in financing Islamic terrorist activities due to a large volume of trade between South East Asia and Middle East, which has been poorly controlled by authorities since most transactions are realized outside of regular financial channels (Seng Tan - Ramakisna: 2004: 96-97).

**Malaysian Islamic groups**

In contemporary Malaysia, there exist many Islamist groups or parties which fight for change of the regime character, or are at least accused of doing so by the government. The most important of them is Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). PAS initially enjoyed support of only rural population in the East coast of Malaysian peninsula. However, since 1970s its popularity has grown within urban population (Stark, 2005: 313). Today, PAS represents the main competitor for ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Its rise was to an important degree facilitated by corruption scandals in the government. In 1999 election, following Asian financial crisis, PAS not only won substantial support on federal level, but seized control of north-eastern states (Collins, 2003: 80; Side, 2008: 347).

As the immediate motive for the crackdown on PAS, served its declaration of Holy war against the United States of America (Noor: 2004, 37; Smith: 2005, 49). Preceding the arrestment of PAS representatives, a score of members of the Kumpulan Militant Malaysia (KMM), a militant Muslim group with links to PAS and Al-Qaeda, were taken into custody (Sohdy, 2003: 365). Radicalization of PAS after U.S. declared War on Terror which was interpreted by party as American War on Islam led to the decline in PAS support among moderate Muslim Malays and Malaysian non-Muslim population for who Pan-Malaysian Islamic party was an alternative to the ruling coalition. The result of this was electoral debacle in 2004 elections in which the party lost its stronghold in Terengganu and Kelantan. Weak performance at the ballot box and oppression from state institutions forced the party to change its rhetoric. The main goal of PAS to establish Islamic state in Malaysia remained intact, but it has been toned down. Party no longer questions government for its cold stand towards Sharia, and focuses on its democratic deficit instead (Hamid, 2010:159). The reason of this change is the alternation of part of its leadership. But in reality, the party ideology has not changed very much; the new course is more tactical as well as in the case of European extreme right-wing parties, that in order to exist as legal organizations changed their statutes and declared themselves as defenders of democracy. Party is now doing everything it can to avoid mistakes that could give UMNO led government pretext for crackdown.(Noor: 2004, 37; Smith: 2005, 49). On the other hand, Malaysian authorities are benevolent to activities of Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia (HTM), the local branch of global Hizbut Tahrir party. Despite the fact, that the main goal of Hizbut Tahrir is re-establishing of Caliphate, its philosophy is less violent than in the case of Al-Kaida or other Wahhabist groups. The reason why government does not pull its weapons against HTM is persuasion that Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia poses little threat to Malaysian state and at the same time represents a strong rival to PAS (Osam, 2009). There are also Islamic missionary movements, so-called dakwah. The two most important of them are Al Arqam (Dural Arqam) and Islamic Young Movement of Malaysia (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or ABIM). Al Arqurm is a messianic neo-Sufist movement that gained popularity among young Malaysian professionals, which in 2007 spurred warning from Department of Religious Affairs. Authorities recommended its leader to stop his messianic preachment, otherwise the movement would be treated as a threat to Malaysian regime. The second group is ABIM, a Wahhabist movement whose main goal is establishing Islamic state in Malaysia. ABIM regularly cooperates with PAS in elections battles on both state and federal level. In 1980, the most pragmatic ABIM leader Anwar Ibrahim was co-opted by UMNO (Hamid, 2010: 162 - 163; Stark, 2005: 309-310). Paradoxically, in terms of political development and Islamization of public policy it was a co-optation of UMNO by ABIM rather than the other way around. Government acted too against potential rivals of its own project, Islam Hahari. Following 2004 election victory of ruling coalition, the government harassed non-militant Islamic sect Tarikat Samanaih Ibrahim Bonjol for reportedly being a deviant sect for its attitude towards Quran, which the movement claimed is only a historical text. The result of this was arrestment of 70 members of the sect. In 2005, the government suppressed Sky Kingdom sect that enjoyed waste followership among Muslims as well as Christians, Buddhists and Hindus. The reason for this, was the authorities’ opinion, that the group posed ideological rivalry to Islam Hadhari (Humprheys, 2010: 39).

Thus, it is arguable, that Malaysian government is obsessed by religious institutions which are not under its control and declared them as threat to stability of the country, despite its peaceful disputation as in the case of Sky Kingdom or Tarikat Samanaih Ibrahim Bonjol. If the government’s paranoia is not the explanation, the reason of its behaviour is to attempt to satisfy conservative Muslims or prevent attacks of Islamist radicals on these heretics. Problematic is also relation of UMNO led government and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party. PAS was in 1980s a member of coalition government, and after 2008 elections PAS engaged in talks about its possible participation in the future government (Hamayotsu, 2010). In this light, it is possible to label Malaysian government as highly hypocritical. PAS is on one hand treated as a serious partner, on the other hand it is described as a security threat. In fact, there is some evidence of the relation between PAS and militant Islamist organization KMM. Radicalism of PAS can be also explained as a result of limitation of electoral competition. The parties of ruling coalition enjoy access to federal funds, which effectively allow them to de-facto buy their voters and are also financed by business sphere. In such unequal conditions, supporting the growth of Islamic values among the population is the party’s only tool to expand its electoral support.

**Anti-terrorist law in Malaysia.**

The main component of Malaysian anti-terrorist law represents Internal Security Act, ratified in 1960 as an act originally introduced to help fight communist insurgency. However, it have been extensively used for harassment of political opponents. The abuse of the law was strongly criticized by Western countries, especially by Clinton administration. Approach of U.S.A. and particularly EU has changed since September 2001. Then, Malaysia declared its support for American War on Terror, despite the fact that later American declaration WOT met with criticism on behalf of the former prime minister Mohamad Mahatir. ISA gives Malaysian authorities option to bypass constitutional rights, since the law permits the government to detain suspects without judicial review. Problematic is not only the fact of using the law against political opposition, but also in case of standard criminal activities if the police has not enough evidence for standard arrestment procedure suspects are arrested on the provision of ISA (Taya, 2010: 489-490). Internal Security Act was followed by other oppressive laws, for instance Printing Press and Publication Act, the Emergency Ordinance, the Official Secrets Acts and the Sedition Act or the Provisions of the Dangerous Drugs Act. All the laws are designed to maintain the political status quo and eliminate any physical or ideological challenges to the regime security. Some critics also argue that ISA is very similar to U.S. Patriot Act which in turn explains the lack of criticism from American official statements (Humpreyes: 2010, 24, 29). During the election campaign before 2008 general elections, ISA had become one of important issues of the elections and prime minister Najib Razak declared possibility of replacement of this law. But would be naive to expect that Malaysian government will resign on effective tool of regime security. The new law planned for year 2012 will be less controversial than Internal Security Act, but still there will be place for its misusing in order to keep the interests of ruling coalition.

**Regional and International Counter Terrorism cooperation**

The anti-terrorist co-operation in South East Asia is even more complicated than in the case of European Union. Association of Southeast Asian Nations is organization based on the intergovernmental cooperation and its fundamental rule is non-interference in internal affairs of its members states (Ramakhisna: 2005, 29). Since its foundation in 1967, ASEAN has been suffering from animosity among some of its members. In this environment, the option of common counter-terrorist effort is much complicated, especially, if the important tool of this cooperation is sharing intelligence information. This situation has somewhat changed after the terrorist attack in Bali 2002. The tragedy revealed a failure of intelligence services, not only on regional level, but even more fatal was lack of cooperation between Indonesian civil and military services (Chau, 2008: 636). Another reason for regional and international counter-terrorist co-operation is also generous finance assistance. Using U.S. assistance is quite problematic because these programs also include credits for defence purchases, for instance Malaysia bought new U.S. F-18 jets with money dedicated too boosting its anti-terrorist capabilities (Sohdy, 2003: 379). Supersonic jets are not probably the best option how to deal with terrorist activities on Malaysian soil. Another explanation of growing collaboration among regional states is their fear of more American interference into their internal affairs. In order to keep U.S. out, the members reached agreement on creation of Action Plan for enhancing co-operation in intelligence sharing and coordination of anti-terrorist laws. One of the most significant outcomes of these efforts was the creation of Regional Training Centre to Counter Terrorism in Kuala Lumpur (Chau, 2008: 630, 634; Seng Tan - Ramaksishna, 2004: 94-95). Despite these efforts, most co-operation is still on bilateral or sub-regional level. This is also complicated by accusations of some members states‘ top politicians, for instance former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew, who called Indonesia the nest of terror. Quite similarly, it did not help the cooperation between his country and Indonesia, when former Prime Minister of Malaysia called thousands of Filipinos workers in the Sabah terrorists as a pretext for their expulsion (Emmers, 2009: 168).

**Conclusion**

For Malaysian government, the most important goal is to keep its power or expand its power into new spheres. For this reason, Malaysia welcomed U.S. declared WOT as an option to avoid Western criticism of its internal policy. On the other hand, at home stage it is a strong critic. UMNO led government would now strengthen its pressure on opposition groups without having fear of harming ties with West. Malaysia was also rewarded by the finance assistance for its counter-terrorist efforts. Declaration of Malaysia as a stable state cooperating in WOT has also other positive impact for Malaysian government; the continuation of inflow of foreign direct investments into the country. This is too an important factor, since it is a necessary condition for regimes such as Malaysian, which are based on functional legitimacy, i.e. general population accepts limitation of its rights in exchange for well material conditions. In Malaysian case, it is possible to argue that regime is relatively too activist as showed in the attempt to control Malaysian Islam. These efforts has many miscalculated outcomes such as radicalization of Malaysian Muslim population. Thus, the government’s efforts lead to a paradox situation.

The absolute majority of social and political specialists claims that with growing income the influence of radical Islam declines. But Malaysia has been witnessing the opposite trend. In the last 30 years there is a strong correlation between GDP growth and growing influence of radical Islam.

In Malaysia, in some cases it is extremely complicated to analyze, if the government acts in the interest of national security or regime security. Arguably, the most complicated case represents PAS. The party wants to change character of Malaysian regime and establish Islamic state but only through electoral battle, hence it is possible to say that PAS poses threat to ruling BN coalition, but no threat to national security.

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