

Defending Zionism in Malaysia

By Bruce Gilley

Obama's vision of moderate Islam is a sham



On April 24, after teaching an evening graduate seminar as part of a ten-day visit at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, I had to flee the country. Islamist agitators took issue with a talk I had given the previous day on Malaysian foreign policy where I criticized the anti-Semitic attacks on Israel of its political leaders. I knew enough about the political dynamics of the country to know that I was no longer safe. I arrived in Bangkok early the next morning. Akmal Saleh, the head of the ruling party's youth brownshirt wing, called for me to be banned from the country. The Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim even took time to declare that I was a "mediocre scholar" who should never have been allowed

in.

If this is the “moderate Islam” of Malaysia promised to the American public by former President Barack Obama when he visited in 2014, then something has gone terribly wrong. What the incident shows is that growing wealth in the Muslim world is not the antidote to extremism that the modernizationists hope. Rather, it is fueling a new wave of Islamic extremism that governments are not prepared to manage.

Obama’s trip to Malaysia was the first visit by a U.S. president since 1966, and the last. The hiatus was not a scheduling problem. Shortly after becoming independent from Britain in 1963, Malaysia’s once constitutionally equal society took a sharp turn in the direction of ethnic and religious discrimination. The largely Muslim Malay population was given special privileges in business, government, and education, and social policy suffered under an increasingly heavy stamp of Islam.

Externally, this manifested in a growing obsession with the destruction of Israel. Malaysia voted in favor of the “Zionism is racism” resolution at the United Nations in 1975 and then sought to derail the General Assembly’s rescission of the resolution in 1991.

The First and Second Gulf Wars pushed Malaysia further into Islamic radicalism and anti-Israel advocacy. The rank anti-Semitism of long-serving (1981 to 2003) Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed found a ready audience domestically, while isolating the country abroad.

Hopes were high when Mahathir was forced to retire in 2003. After a confused interregnum, the ruling party installed reformer Najib Razak in 2009. He made a point of calling out Islamic radicalism in the country and seeking to rebuild the nation with a multi-ethnic identity based on equality. Islamic terrorist groups abroad, he frequently opined, were a stain on

the good reputation of Islam and would be opposed by Malaysia. Malaysia would henceforth focus on shared economic development and reform the spoils system for ethnic Malays.

Obama's visit in 2014, halfway through Najib's chancellorship, was a high point of this attempted transformation. Prominent Malaysians, [including](#) the head of the Malaysian Bar Council, urged Obama not to be taken in with the "myth of moderate Islam" in the country. The evidence on the ground was that radical Islam was on the march and local politicians were playing to the crowds, they wrote. Another Malaysian urging Obama to emphasize individual rights was none other than Ibrahim, then in jail: "Jeffersonian ideals still resonate with people in this part of the world," he wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed.

But Obama always preferred soaring rhetoric and social transformation over cautious optimism and practical policy. In a speech at the University of Malaya, he avoided discussions of radical Islam, while noting that "Malaysia won't succeed if non-Muslims don't have opportunity." A few years later, Najib was ousted in a corruption scandal and Malaysia slid rapidly backwards.

I knew something was wrong upon my arrival in Kuala Lumpur on April 17, from the jarring appearance of Arab men everywhere with their black-clad harems trailing them in medieval fashion. Malaysia is now considered quite congenial to the Wahhabists of the Arabian Peninsula. At a church service that Sunday, the pastor told the congregation not to let their fears of "religious extremism" dominate their lives. Several congregants expressed surprise that I was at the University of Malaya, because of its famous discrimination against Chinese students, many of whom are Christians.

The shock is that alongside this rising Islamic skein is a fabulously well-developed country. The urban infrastructure is superb, the cultural sites interesting, and the people almost

always friendly and professional. I thought the “women only” sections on the subway were a great idea, for the same reason we have many “women only” gyms in the United States. My colleagues at the various institutes hosting me at the University of Malaya were genuinely interested in creating top-ranked places of education. That’s what, I think in retrospect, made me keen to speak up: Muslim Malays can no longer appeal to their poverty to explain the comforts of Jew-hatred abroad and anti-Chinese bigotry at home.

In the days leading up to my speech, I was surprised to see how openly anti-Semitic the Malaysian political establishment had become. Malaysia had turned itself into a hub for Hamas operatives in the 2010s and hosted Hamas leaders. At a mass rally hosted by Prime Minister Ibrahim weeks after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, Minister of Agriculture and Food Security Mohamed Sabu delivered a blood-thirsty speech that ended with the chant “Israel will soon disappear.” (*Israel akan tamat*). My greatest shock was to turn on the nightly news and see hosts bedecked in Palestinian garb and signing off with the genocidal slogan “From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will be Free.”

It was after watching this that I inserted into my paper the following: “A country whose political leaders advocate a second Holocaust against the Jewish people will never be a serious player in world affairs, and will certainly never be a friend or partner of the United States.”

When I delivered the talk, nothing was said in response. But once I posted those *bon mots* on X, the explosion happened. The minister of education cancelled my visit. I was told to return to my hotel and await further instructions. Muslim student groups said they would mount protests unless I apologized. Having spent a decade as a journalist in China prior to my academic career, I knew a dicey situation when I saw one. Once safely in Thailand (with its enduring and strong relationship with Israel) the next morning, I blasted the government and

the university for caving to a mob. The government helpfully clarified that “no further action” would be taken against me “because he has left the country.” I set up a GoFundMe campaign to cover my lost expenses.

In the days after, I received many emails from Malaysians thanking me for saying the unsayable. Most of them were Chinese and Indians, who along with the pre-Malay indigenous groups, now account for 50 percent of Malaysia’s population.

“Malaysia used to promote itself as a moderate Muslim country but it is now well on its way to becoming an ultra-conservative Islamic state,” wrote a Chinese woman to me. “I really feel very upset by how antisemitic this country has become. It made me realize I need to work towards moving out of this country that does not share my values or beliefs.”

An Indian man wrote to me: “There are many of us who stand with Israel’s right to self-determination but are unable to speak out against antisemitism and extremism in a country that seems to be heading down the path of Talibanism. I fear for the future of this country for my two young daughters under an increasingly intolerant Islamic regime. Thank you for speaking on behalf of us, the minorities who are forced to zip our mouths shut for fear of their retribution.”

Unfortunately, similar dynamics are taking shape in neighboring Indonesia, whose economic expansion is even more extraordinary. Indonesia wants to join the OECD but, like Malaysia, refuses to recognize Israel and so remains on the outside. It was also praised by Obama as a model of moderate Islam, which has become a sort of running joke among Indonesia-watchers. I doubt I will return to either country, ever. Life is too short to spend your time in a society of bigots. But if my experience is any indication, governments in the West need to take seriously the need for a strategy to combat not just Islamic terrorism, but something far more pernicious: an Islamic ascendance in world affairs from

wealthy countries like Indonesia and Malaysia that will attack the principles of liberal civilization with an unending malice.

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