

UNDERSTANDING THE MALAYSIAN PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS AMERICA IN THE POST 9/11 ERA: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

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BACKGROUND

On Tuesday morning September 11,2001, three hijacked planes hit the World Trade Centre (WTC) Twin Tower in New York and the Pentagon building outside Washington. A fourth hijacked plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. The sudden attacks had ultimately destroyed the twin WTC towers and damaged the Pentagon building, killing 3000 people and more than US100 billion dollars in damage (Johannen, Smith and Gomaz, 2003).

The September 11 attacks had clearly changed the world. The attacks are a water-shed, with far-reaching implications for the entire world (AbuKhalil, 2002). Immediately after the September 11 incident, the US has dramatically changed its foreign policies, particularly in relation to the Gulf countries i.e Iraq, Iran, Palestine and Lebanon. These countries are greatly affected by the sharp re-evaluation of the US foreign policies.

After the attacks, the USA declared a war on terrorism by attacking the Islamic Taliban regime in Afghanistan that had been harbouring the Al-Qeada terrorist group headed by Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect of the attacks (Ramakrishna,2003). Subsequently, on 29 January 2002, Bush had characterized Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an `Axis of Evil' because of their research programmes aimed at developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Bush indicated that the overall objective now involves not merely disrupting Al-Qaeda cells worldwide, but also forestalling the danger of the terrorists; teaming up with a small group of nations seeking to develop nuclear and biological weapons (Ramakrishna, 2003).

The issue of Iraq particularly was perceived differently after the September 11 incident. Iraq is now seen as a serious treat in the American war on terrorism. According to one source, the single most important factor in the decision to go to war was the change in President Bush's position towards Iraq after the September 11 incident, with a military objective of eliminating Iraq's weapons of

mass destruction (WMD), based on the (now flawed) assumption that Saddam Hussein could pass his presumed WMD to other terrorists based internationally (Contemporary Security Policy, 2005).

In the year 2003, the USA declared a war on Iraq even without the consent from the United Nations. The late President Saddam Hussein was caught after a long search but the WMD were never found. Iraq was put under a military authority by the Allied forces until a newly elected government of Iraq was set up. But up until now the Iraqis never knew peace with the bombings and attacks between the ousted militia groups and the Allied forces occurring almost every day in their surroundings.

The US relation with Israel was further strengthened and tightened after the September 11 incident, with the USA president's demand for the Palestinians to end terrorism, while justifying the Israeli violence as 'self-defence' (AbuKhalil, 2002).

The US unconditional support towards Israel was further exhibited during the attack of Israel on Lebanon in July 2006. President George W. Bush openly supports Israel's military incursions into Gaza and Lebanon, citing Israel's right of self defence. His statement came after his administration vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution by Qatar on behalf of Arab states that called on Israel to immediately end its military incursion in Gaza (The New Straits Times, 18th of July 2006).

MALAYSIAN PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS AMERICA

It is difficult to estimate the degree of anti-American sentiments among Malaysian Muslims. It is largely volatile and unpredictable, most often provoked and inflamed by the occurrence of certain incidents affecting Muslims or Muslim countries, such as the war on Afghanistan, the ongoing sanctions on Iraq and the attack on Lebanon by Israel. For example, the recent attack on Lebanon by Israel was with the consent from USA. This has sparked hatred and resentment among the Malaysian Muslims, with more than 10,000 people marching in protest of these attacks (Berita Harian, 28/7/06). However, the issue of a nuclear arms programme from Iran received is a rather moderate and mild reaction from both the Malaysian government and its people.

While it is basically quite clear and apparent as to what seems to be the hostile and negative Malaysian Muslims' perception towards America, the perceptions among the Malaysian non-Muslims toward Americans remain ambiguous, hidden and barely visible. Malaysian non-Muslims do not manifest their views in the open unlike the Malaysian Muslims. They are more reserved. Generally, it can be understood that Malaysian non-Muslims may have a certain level of negative feelings and perceptions toward America pertaining to these Gulf issues. They also may feel a certain degree of sympathy towards the people in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, but they take the issues and evaluate them based on humanitarian perspective, not based on religion. Some issues particularly the issue of Palestine is undeniably a religious issue while the issue

of nuclear arms programme in Iran is mainly a political issue involving Muslim countries and USA.

Research done to understand Malaysians' perceptions, attitudes and views of America is lacking. Even though there appear to be so many instances and occasions such as anti-American demonstrations that clearly showed and reflected Malaysians' perceptions toward Americans, these reflections have never been examined systematically in a scientific study prior to this study. Therefore, the objective of the study is to understand the perceptions among Malaysian towards America pertaining the Gulf issues as well as to understand the role of media in shaping these perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, both the quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques were used to provide accurate picture of the issues. However, due to the limitation of time and space, only qualitative method (Focus Group Interview) is reported in this paper. Four focus groups were used in the study. Each group consists of eight participants. Two of the groups selected involve a combination of Muslim and non-Muslim participants, held in Pulau Pinang and Kuala Lumpur. The other two groups were selected from Johor and Terengganu, and consisted of Muslim participants only.

This allotment was done in this way in order to illustrate the different perspectives between Muslims and non-Muslims on the topic. All the participants selected were more than 20 years old, in order to gain better and more mature responses. All participations were strictly voluntary and the participants were given a free hand to answer the survey questions and to provide feedback for the interviews.

There were three main issues asked in the focus group interviews. The first issue focused on the awareness, perceptions and feelings among the participants pertaining to America and its people, with regards to the Gulf issues. The next issue was on America and Islam. Questions posed were as why do the participants think America associates terrorism with Islamic countries and whether they think the American's foreign policy towards Muslim countries will change in the next 1 – 5 years. The last issue was on the role of media in shaping the perceptions. The participants were asked on the participants' main resources of information about the issues above and do media influence their perception towards American government.

FINDINGS

i. Perceptions towards America and its people

From the focus group interviews, it has been found that all the participants are aware of the issues pertaining to America and its conflict with the Gulf countries. However, the depth of their knowledge varies from one participant to

the other. Some have vast information and understanding on the matter while others hardly know anything at all, except for the fact that America is at war with the concerned countries.

When asked about their feelings towards the government of America, everybody was mad and felt that the government was very unfair and cruel. Comments on Israel's alliance with America are also plenty. The following are their explanations:

"for me, American government is inhuman. They want to show off their power and the world must follow their orders."

"I am mad, not particularly because I'm a Muslim, but more because the actions taken by them are unfair and unjust to the humankind, regardless of their race."

"..angry and sad because mainly those who died are Muslims. But then again not only Muslims suffered, people of other religion are also victimized. It's like the American government is heartless..."

"..sad and angry,... because they generalize all Muslims as terrorists.."

"They are like, inhuman because they kill so many people in the process of finding terrorists. So, I think they are unfair."

"It had been mention in the Al-Quran, one day the Jewish people will be abolished from the earth. By then, the American people had aware of it and everybody is likely to be part of the Muslim. This phenomenon had minimized the influences of the Jews at the international level. The America wants to have the main power in the world. I think one main power that can challenge the power of America is the Islamic power."

However, most of the participants did not blame the Americans in isolation for what is happening in the Arab countries. They said that it is not fair to blame them as most of the Americans are against war too. These are what they said on this matter:

"I do not have hard feelings for the Americans for what had happened. I think many of them are not even aware of this matter. They should not be blamed for their government's actions."

"Not every American supports Bush. There are NGOs who are against them. So we should not blame the Americans."

“There are demonstrations in America against the war. Not only muslims participate in the demonstrations, many other race participates as well.”

“... especially parents whose children are in the war, they are heavily against the war.. they always protest the idea of having war and wants their children to come back home.. they always ask the government to stop the war...”

However, there are a few points given on their role in this issue. According to them, the people could do more in terms of putting pressure on the government to stop the war. The following comments were given:

“For me, the American people are guilty if they choose and support their government...”

“the Americans can, more or less, be blamed because they had chosen that government. They could, if they want to, to force the government to change their policy towards the Islamic countries by picketing or other actions. Too badly, they are not doing anything to stop the unjust actions taken by their government to the Islamic countries.”

ii. America and Islam

The next issue concerns America and Islam. The participants were asked to give their views on America’s reasons for associating terrorism with Islam. Interestingly, a pattern emerges where most of the non-Muslim participants associate the conflict with economic reasons while most Muslim participants think that it is due to religious reasons. The economic reason is due to the fact that the Arab countries possess oil, a commodity much sought after by the global nation and which America wants to take control of. Some of the comments on economy are as follows, (given mostly by non-Muslims interviewees):

“I think there’s a reason for America’s act...maybe it’s a political reason, but I think most probably it’s not political reason, more because of economic reason...when they’re having war, most of the reason is because of the oil. Because most of the country at war they have oil. So I think this is the main reason.”

“...I think it’s because of economy factor, because most Islam countries have oil source, so it’s an advantage of America succeeds in controlling the countries.”

“America wants to take control of the gulf countries because of the oil. They want to control the countries’ oil to improve their economy. America does not have intention to bring peace to the gulf countries.”

“In my opinion, I agree with them, that America is more focused on the economy. They want to conquer the world’s economy, that’s why they attack Iraq.”

“My opinion is both, economy and politic. They want to control the oil, and also they want to attack because of Islam...but more to economic.”

On the other hand, the participants had aggressively stated their opinions on the religious reasons which dictated America’s actions. They highlighted how America has discriminated against Islam and the growing ambition of Israel. These are some of the excerpts from their deliberation (Muslim participants):

“I think they regard Islam as terrorist, that’s why they attack the Islamic countries, not because of economic reasons.”

“For me, historically, Israel wants to build a powerful and terrifying nation through various channels, through alliances. They want to appear as the best in economics and such.”

When the participants were asked whether they think that the American foreign policy towards Muslim countries would change in the next five years, most answered ‘no’. They were of the opinion that America had developed a negative view over their relationship with the people from Muslim countries. One of the reasons given involves the time span:

“It’s not going to change, because it has been happening 5 years ago, so it will still happen in the coming 5 years.”

“I don’t think the situation will change because it has become a norm. It has been going on for a long time already.”

Another reason involves religious matters, including Israel’s influence over America. Many people felt that due to Israel’s influence over America, chances that the American policy would change would also be rather remote. The following are the excerpts taken from some respondents:

“I don’t think their policy will change, because the Jews will continue to influence America.”

“I think America will continue with its foreign policy considering their current development, along with Israel’s support, and their veto

power in PBB(UN), also their support to Israel's attacks. For me, America's foreign policy will not change in the next 5 years"

"Referring to the current development, it does not seem that America is going to lessen the attacks. On the other hand, they are providing extreme help for the Israel...in terms of the nuclear weapons and such. I read I the newspaper that the Jews are asking for more nuclear weapons. So, looking at these developments, I don't see that America is going to change soon."

Apart from the issues regarding Israel and religious differences, another reason given on why the participants think the policy wouldn't change is due to economic reasons. America is said to be interested in taking control of the Arab countries' revenues in oil. Citations are as follows:

"It's not going to change in the near future because every President, like Clinton, still attacks the countries with economic importance to America. So it's really up to the President, whether they want to change or not. But most probably they will not.."

"I am certain that America is greedy to take all the oil in the gulf countries. They cannot just ignore this asset. It does not matter who is the President, they would still want the oil, only with different methods. "

A couple of participants said that there is a possibility of America changing its policy within the next five years. One participant said that it could be because of pressure from the American people themselves while another said that it depends if President Bush is replaced by another president or if he is willing to change his stand (opinion given on January 2006).

"I hope the next election will bring changes to the American foreign policy..but only if Presiden Bush is replaced."

"Maybe it will change because of pressure from the American citizens."

"...depends if the President is willing to change or not..."

"I think depends on the new president, depends on the new management. But I have a strong feeling that it might change."

iii. The Role Of Media

Everybody has agreed that they have gained information about the issues from the mass media. They are also of the opinion that the media do play a role

in shaping their perceptions and views towards the issues. Thus, their perceptions are shaped by whatever themes the media exudes in their messages. The following are the participants' comments:

"The stories and pictures shown in the media can show us how the Palestinians are the victims of Israel. The Americans on the other hand seems to support the Israelis."

"The media influences me because as we know, the news is not based from rumours. The reporters actually look for the news. I believe all the news reported by the media."

"The media influences my perceptions as it is through the media I can gather the motive of the American government's actions."

Nevertheless, there are a couple of participants who think that the media does not influence them. Their opinions are as follows:

"I am very open with it and is not influenced by the reports given by the reporter."

"Media is one of the important sources for me to know about the issues. However, media do not influence my perception about this issue."

The media they have claimed to use in order to gain information are mainstream and alternative media. The mentioned mainstream media are as follows:

"My source for information is mainly mainstream media such as newspapers like Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian. I also watch news from TV1, TV2, TV3 and ASTRO."

"The internet has a lot of information but sometimes they are not so reliable, so I prefer electronic media like CNN."

Quotes on usage of alternative media are as follows:

"I also read Harakah."

"In my opinion, electronic media and the internet can give more information. Print media does not have much freedom to carry out their freedom of speech compared to the internet. The internet is a freer medium to spread information on issues like this."

CONCLUSION

The overall objective of this study is to obtain an overall picture of Malaysians' perception towards the Americans, their government and its foreign policy in the aftermath of the September 11th incident. The research findings shows that most Malaysian respondents are aware of the issues, but looked at each category of the issues stated above as one issue at large instead of looking at them separately.

There seem to be quite an observable difference among the perceptions of the American government's actions and its foreign policy between Muslims and the non-Muslims in Malaysia. Muslims respondents have much negative perceptions and felt that the American government practices discrimination towards the Muslim community. The non-Muslims respondents, however, look at it from a different perspective. They felt that economic reasons had caused the American government to attack the Gulf countries more than anything else.

However many people are aware of the distinction between government and the people of a country. Some argue that the government is representative of the people but the stand of the government does not necessarily directly translates into the decision of all the people of the concerned country. Majority of respondents felt that many innocent people had suffered throughout the Gulf war and the American foreign policy will not change in the next five years.

It can be deducted from the analysis that media does influence the perceptions of the participants through many different sources. Most of the participants gain information and knowledge on the issues particularly from the local mainstream media, as well as the alternative media such as Harakah dan the Internet.

To conclude, the research findings strongly indicate that the Malaysian perception towards the American government and its foreign policy currently are unfavourable.

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