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Malaysia: How Will It Perform on the UN Security Council?

The country brings some baggage of its own to the Council.

By Jared Genser

In 2014, Malaysia has made international headlines with the two Malaysia Airlines tragedies. The country did not, however, make much news when it was elected to the United Nations Security Council yesterday, yet the election gives this Southeast Asian country the opportunity to work with the global powers on a host of pressing and complex issues, among them the threat of terrorism from the Islamic State, the conflicts in Iraq, Ukraine and Syria, and the panoply of rampant human rights abuses worldwide. How well equipped is Malaysia to contribute to the Council, and will its own domestic policy agenda get in the way?

To start with, the country's economy is performing well. A 2015 budget introduces more deficit-slashing measures, including subsidy reforms and a higher goods and service tax. These measures should improve the national balance sheet. But as the middle and lower classes are forced to cope with higher prices, questions remain as to whether adequate steps are being taken to combat corruption and diversify the country's revenue base, which is still heavily [reliant on oil exports](#).

At the United Nations, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has said much about leading a "Global Movement of Moderates" to combat extremism around the world. A laudable goal, no doubt, but the story at home is hardly one of moderation and tolerance.

Most notable has been the government's crackdown against opposition and civil society groups under its anachronistic Sedition Act of 1948, a law that the [UN Human Rights Council](#) has strongly criticized and the *New York Times* called "[deplorable](#)." The Act criminalizes any speech spoken "to excite disaffection" for the government. The law is currently being reviewed by the High Court to

determine if it is constitutional. In the meantime, within the past year, dozens of dissidents, academics and activists have been charged, and face up to 30 years in prison if convicted.

While critics of the government are hauled up on charges, however, groups sympathetic to Najib's ruling UMNO party are given free reign to incite violence and racial tension. From calling for the burning of Bibles to telling Malaysia's ethnic Chinese and Indians to "go back home," these groups act with impunity.

The Sedition Act is not the only tool the government has to subdue opposition and dissent. Fearful of the traction the opposition has gained, the Government has twice managed to conjure up [dubious sodomy charges](#) against opposition leader, [Anwar Ibrahim](#), in both cases on the heels of a strong electoral performance by the country's opposition coalition. Moreover, two of Anwar's lawyers have themselves been charged with sedition, in one case, simply for commenting publicly on the case itself. The allegations alone are damning enough in a predominately Muslim country; the fact that Anwar could well be sent back to a second lengthy prison term is a clear sign of Prime Minister Najib Razak's fundamental insecurity and unwillingness to allow his government to face serious questions about its performance.

Perhaps nothing has been more emblematic of Malaysia's backwards slide on the human rights agenda than the state of the media. In the last thirteen years it has dropped consistently on Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index from a high of 110 to its current low of 147 out of 180 countries [surveyed](#), which places it next to Russia, Burma, and Turkey.

Yet domestic issues are not the only thing that Malaysia has to worry about now. It will be compelled to engage on some of the biggest challenges facing the world and, if it wants to have any impact, Malaysia will have to stand up on tough and potentially divisive issues such as terrorism and human rights. Its strategy to get on the Council was pretty straightforward: Be a moderate voice representing the interests of a small Muslim, Asian country. This was feasible as Malaysia solicited election votes; staying moderate will be another challenge altogether.

Malaysia's messaging and domestic policies will be subjected to close scrutiny. Its record on human rights leaves much to be desired, with the Sedition Act just one example of the country falling short of international human rights norms and setting a poor precedent for other states in region. One can only hope that Malaysia

will not try to avoid having a spotlight focused on its own abuses by giving a free pass to repressive governments on the Council's agenda.

When it comes to international conflicts and terrorism, Malaysia's voice is typically subdued. It does take a stand publicly on horrific abuses, but only after clear red-lines are crossed.

Take for example the biggest issue facing the Security Council at the moment: the Islamic State (IS). Malaysia made a complete about face in its messaging once it became clear that the group was extremist, but it was not that long ago that it was expressing admiration for the militants. Just this summer, Najib made [public statements](#) praising the bravery of the IS forces. Najib has since backtracked, evidently drawing a "red-line" at the gruesome beheadings videos, and he now denounces IS violence. He made this clear during his statement at the [UN General Assembly](#) in September and joined other ASEAN nations in a [joint statement](#) in support of the Security Council's resolutions condemning the group. Malaysia's response to IS is all the more important in light of growing [reports](#) of Malaysians volunteering to serve in the terrorist outfit. Given the sudden change in position, it is unclear if Najib is really revolted by the actions of IS, but his change of rhetoric and the support for air strikes strongly suggest that Malaysia will not stand in the way of concerted efforts within the Security Council to extinguish it.

Malaysia was similarly quiet about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, until it found itself right in the middle of it this summer when Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 was shot down. Beyond claiming that it was "[frustrated](#)" with the separatists for interfering with recovery efforts, Malaysia has not publicly said anything about Russia's actions in Ukraine. Its absence from that discussion, especially in light of its ownership of the airline, suggests a deep reluctance to take a clear stand on divisive issues, even when its own interests are directly impacted.

On Syria, Malaysia was again quiet until the Ghouta chemical weapons attack, another red-line incident. In response to the attacks, Malaysia Foreign Minister Anifah Aman [called upon](#) "those responsible for such irresponsible and inhuman acts to be brought to justice" and stated that chemical weapons inspectors should be allowed to inspect the sites. It is unclear whether the country would have spoken out against the violence if not for those attacks.

It is a particularly challenging international environment that confronts the Security Council members. As one of them, if Malaysia continues to follow and not lead, it may not make any enemies. But it certainly won't be making history.

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