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THE NEW GREAT GAME



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THE NEW MALAYSIA ON THE WORLD STAGE

Saifuddin Abdullah

MALAYSIA'S 14th General Elections, held on May 9th, 2018, heralded the first regime change in Malaysia's history, with the hitherto ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition—which had enjoyed an uninterrupted reign over the country since 1957—having been voted out of power. We are proud to state that the transition of power was peaceful.

The leader of the Alliance of Hope, or Pakatan Harapan (PH), Tun Mahathir Mohamad, was sworn in as Malaysia's 7th Prime Minister on May 10th, 2018, at 93 years of age, making Tun Mahathir the world's oldest head of government. He was also the fourth and longest serving Prime Minister of Malaysia, having served from 1981 to 2003.

WINDS OF CHANGE

Since taking over the administration, the PH coalition, led by Tun Mahathir, has been carrying out wide-

spread reforms to clean up corruption and restore the people's trust in government. Among the most significant reforms is the reinstatement of a separation of powers in Malaysia's governance framework.

As part of the reform, the Election Commission will come under the supervision of the Parliamentary Select Committee, and will no longer fall under the aegis of the Prime Minister's Office. Instead, it is now headed by a prominent civil rights advocate.

In upholding the supremacy of law, arbitrary dismissal and controversial appointments of prominent members of the judiciary, such as the Chief Justice and President of the Court of Appeals, are now a thing of the past. The same goes for the office of the Attorney General.

In improving transparency and accountability, as well as increasing checks

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Photo: Malaysian Foreign Ministry

Tunku Abdul Rahman, pictured during the proclamation of Independence at Merdeka Stadium, 61 years ago

and balances, Commissions like the Election Commission, the National Audit Department, the Judicial Appointment Commission, and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission will now be answerable directly to Parliament. The appointment of key personnel must be recommended and endorsed by a Parliamentary Select Committee.

Parliamentary Select Committees, caucuses, and an opposition member as head of the Parliamentary Accounts Committee are just some of the new norms in Malaysia's Parliament since the new Government took charge of the administration and appointed a new Speaker of the Lower House of

Parliament. The Government is also looking to reinstate the Parliamentary Services Act, which was repealed in 1992. The Act provides autonomy to Parliament in conducting its own administration, including staffing and financing—allowing Parliament to be more independent and free of the influence of the executive branch.

The Government is taking steps to repeal the Anti-Fake News Act and the Sedition Act. In order to ensure the emancipation of the press, the Government has also established a Special Committee to review the provisions of several other laws, namely the Printing Presses and Publications Act, and

the Communications and Multimedia Act. At the same time and for the same reason, the suspension of the Security Measures Act, the Prevention of Crime Act, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act are also being reviewed.

Moreover, the Government has declared its intention to abolish the death penalty, and the Malaysian Cabinet has taken the quick step of placing a moratorium on all pending sentences, signaling its intention to present a new narrative on human rights.

In other reforms, the voting age will be reduced to 18, while the Government has also issued a directive for the minimum age of marriages to be set at 18. This initiative aims to put an end to child marriage.

The 11th Malaysia Plan and the 2019 Budget target the raising of the socio-economic standard of the people, to carry out development programs, and to provide infrastructure and utilities to help reduce the poverty gap. They are also aimed at ensuring shared prosperity and narrowing the income disparity between the rich and the poor, and those between different races and ethnic groups. To this end,

the Government has re-categorized its poverty eradication program by expanding the target group to include households that fall within the bottom 40 percent in terms of income (B40 Group).

The answer to the reality of our interconnected world is not fragmentation. It is cooperation. We need to come up with proposals that are fit for the future: a strengthened framework for international cooperation.

The Government has also adopted a policy whereby all newborns in Malaysia, regardless of the nationality or legal status of their parents, should be granted access to formal birth registration procedures and birth certificates. At the same time, under the 11th Malaysia Plan, the National Policy on

Women and the National Action Plan for the Advancement of Women have been further strengthened.

ON THE WORLD STAGE

It is against this backdrop of domestic change that Tun Mahathir Mohamad, no stranger to the United Nations, attended the General Debate of the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2018 in New York, taking the stage to represent the New Malaysia and to tell the world just what the New Malaysia stands for, as well as its hopes and aspirations for the future.

In his remarks, he said that



Photo: UN

Tun Mahathir addressing the UN General Assembly in 2018

Malaysians want a new Malaysia that upholds the principles of fairness, good governance, integrity and the rule of law. They want a Malaysia that is a friend to all and enemy of none. A Malaysia that remains neutral and non-aligned. A Malaysia that detests and abhors wars and violence. They also want a Malaysia that will speak its mind on what is right and wrong, without fear or favor. A new Malaysia that believes in cooperation based on mutual respect, for mutual gain. The New Malaysia that offers a partnership based on our philosophy of 'prosper-thy-neighbor'.

MALAYSIA BAHARU'S FOREIGN POLICY FRAMEWORK

Acting on a Cabinet decision, and as a Parliamentary Select Committee or Caucus on foreign policy is yet to be formed, Tun Mahathir's speech before the

United Nations was brought to Parliament for debate—to gather input, feedback, and ascertain the pulse of Parliament on its views in making Tun Mahathir's United Nations speech the basis for the New Malaysia's foreign policy direction.

Sixteen parliamentarians stood up and contributed to my motion and New Malaysia's Foreign Policy Framework. It was passed unanimously.

I have since gathered input and feedback on the Foreign Policy Framework from, among others, Senior Officers and Diplomats from my beloved Ministry, the Consultative Council on Foreign Policy (CCFP), civil society organizations, representatives of academia, and selected gurus of foreign policy, diplomacy, and international relations.

I tabled the final draft of the Foreign Policy Framework in the Cabinet, and continue the discourse with roundtable discussions on *realizing* the Foreign Policy Framework with youth groups, women's groups, former diplomats, civil society groups, and the private sector. This will be ongoing, because we believe consultation is vital in administering the nation and curating our foreign policy.

CHANGE IN CONTINUITY

Let me be clear that this is not a *new* foreign policy. The last thing our or any country-in-transition needs is a drastic shift in the way it conducts its international affairs. No. What we are aiming for is *Change in Continuity*, a term I coined when pondering the construction of the Foreign Policy Framework.

The New Malaysia will maintain and continue to pursue the core principles of the country's foreign policy, as espoused by Tun Mahathir in his UN speech, with renewed emphasis on certain key areas, and some new priorities in taking Malaysia forward into ASEAN 2025 and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Among the other pillars of the framework are:

- strengthening the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (affectionately known by its metonym, Wisma Putra);

- enhancing cooperation and coordination with other ministries and agencies;
- and strengthening public participation in foreign policy making.

What is significant about the framework is that it is intended to be seen through the lens of a developed, progressive, and mature democracy. No longer must we be constrained by the shackles of a reputation for being a

kleptocracy. The Foreign Policy Framework commits the New Malaysia to being proactive, rather than reactive, and thus lays out three dimensions in which it can contribute proactively and constructively to the global community.

First, where we have the required decisionmaking capacity, we will be vocal, active, and decisive in our participation on all relevant and high-impact forums.

Second, where we do not have such a capacity, we will exert efforts to shape opinions, persuade, and influence discourse on relevant and beneficial issues.

And third, on future and upcoming trends, we will start shaping the discourse through thought leadership, dialogue, and debate, and by contributing ideas through literature and other digital means.

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A Change in Continuity, Not Principles

- Malaysia will be an influencer.
- Malaysia will be a leading voice in ASEAN.
- Malaysia will maintain healthy diplomatic and economic relations with all countries.
- Malaysia will adhere to non-alignment.
- Malaysia will promote and exemplify International Good Governance.
- Malaysia will stand up and raise its voice against tyranny and oppression.
- Malaysia will commit to peaceful resolution of conflicts through dialogue and negotiations.
- Malaysia will espouse economic diplomacy in championing free and fair trade, intra-ASEAN trade, and enhancing synergy between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry.
- Malaysia will strengthen its border security (human trafficking, migrant smuggling, narcotics and illegal goods), combating foreign incursions, including in and around our waters, and resolving border disputes with neighboring countries.
- Malaysia will focus on protecting national security in light of current geopolitical issues such as terrorism, piracy, and cyber crime.
- Malaysia will defend the sovereignty of the South China Sea as a zone of peace, friendship, and trade.
- Malaysia will hasten accession to international conventions and standards, particularly in the area of human rights, and accede to the remaining six core human rights instruments.
- Malaysia will focus on sustainability and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Malaysia will play an active role in climate change by, among others, promoting Malaysia's forestation policy (more than 50 percent of Malaysia is forest area) and reduction in the use of plastic.
- Malaysia will play an active and vocal role in international organizations, including the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and ASEAN.
- Malaysia will govern its affairs in accordance with the principles of democracy, integrity and the rule of law.
- Malaysia will uphold democracy, freedom and human rights.
- Malaysia will strengthen its focus on ASEAN (emphasizing social enterprises, youth, and the empowerment of women), Look East Policy 2.0, and South-South Cooperation.
- Malaysia will prioritize a constructive and strategic engagement on humanitarian issues, and deepen meaningful humanitarian aid (i.e. Myanmar, Bangladesh, Yemen, refugee situations).
- Malaysia will share with the world its language, culture, literature, films, food, etc.

Key Outcomes of Malaysia's Foreign Policy

- Peace and stability in the region through capacity building and conflict resolution measures.
- Close economic partnerships with all nations, particularly with ASEAN member states and other regional friends like the EU.
- Peaceful relations with all countries, regardless of ideology and political system.
- A leadership role in ASEAN, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and other high-impact organizations.
- Active and meaningful participation in the United Nations, especially in efforts to end injustice and oppression, and to uphold international law.
- Exemplify truth, justice, international law, human rights and sustainability, while speaking without fear or favor against oppression and tyranny.
- Recognition as an independent, non-aligned, and principled regional and international actor.
- Malaysia as the leading example of a democratic, inclusive, and progressive Islamic nation.

STRIVING TO BE EXEMPLARY

The Muslim world continues to face crises. The Palestinian issue remains unresolved and there is a protracted sectarian conflict in the Middle East, which is worsening and continues to divide the *ummah*. Furthermore, Muslim minorities in many countries continue to suffer from mistreatment and marginalization. The sentiment of Islamophobia is not receding; rather it is growing around the world.

Worsening an already dire situation, there continues to be a rise of Islam-linked violent radicalism and militancy. There are also persistent problems of poverty and lack of development

in many Muslim communities. There is also a glaring absence of any Muslim country in any prestigious global ranking.

Malaysia will play a prominent role in the OIC to improve the condition of the *ummah*. There must be unity within the OIC in order for it to have more clout and to be more effective in championing the causes of the Muslim world. Malaysia will lead in promoting the concepts of *Maqasid Syari'ah* (higher syariah objectives) and Muslim Democrats within the organization.

Malaysia will also strive to position itself as an exemplary Islamic country,

which is inclusive, developed, and progressive. In so doing, Malaysia can demonstrate to the world the goodness of Islam and the *ummah*, in line with the principle of *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all).

In formulating its foreign policy, Malaysia will be cognizant and make fair assessments on the roles and contributions of various Islamic movements, without any prejudice.

We will lead efforts to improve the fortune and image of the Muslim countries and the *ummah* by, among other things, promoting the role of successful Malaysian Islamic institutions in, for example, higher learning, as well as finance and banking.

HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Issues pertaining to human rights have become more and more pertinent in the discourse of Malaysia's domestic politics. While there remain many challenges in reaching a consensus on specific issues of human rights in Malaysia, the PH government is resolute in making human rights an important part of its administration's agenda. The New Malaysia will uphold and promote human rights without compromising on the fundamental tenets of religion and the Federal Constitution, and this will also be reflected in its foreign policy.

Malaysia will thus advocate human rights more strongly internationally, and will speak on behalf of groups that

Malaysia will also strive to position itself as an exemplary Islamic country, which is inclusive, developed, and progressive.

suffer from mistreatment, suppression, and injustice. Malaysia will be vocal in calling for the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, genocide, war crimes and crimes of aggression, to be brought to justice.

Malaysia will also begin the process towards ratifying relevant UN conventions on human rights. The process will be inclusive, to ensure that views from all domestic stakeholders are taken into account.

Lastly, Malaysia will play an active international role in proposing ideas and opinions that can improve laws, regulations, structures and systems related to the protection of human rights.

UN 2030 AGENDA

Sustainable development has long been at the forefront of international debate from the very onset in the early 1990s, up to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the United Nations General Assembly in 2015.

Malaysia shall aim to ensure that sustainable development is properly implemented—and not just as a form

of climate-imperialism in advancing a nation's status in the eyes of the world. To this end, the SDGs have been incorporated into the 11th Malaysia Plan.

We will also increase cooperation between the public and private sectors, as well as civil society, in planning, implementing, and evaluating the progress of Malaysia's sustainable development—both domestically as well as internationally (especially in the context of ASEAN). Lastly, we will strive to encourage a culture of sustainable development at home, in schools, and in the workplace.

COUNTERING TERROR AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Another highly complex problem is terrorism, which is compounded by the use of sophisticated and cutting-edge technology in the spread of its radical ideology and strategizing terror attacks. This poses a bigger challenge to governments around the world in tracking and circumventing terrorist activities. In their anti-terror efforts, some governments face a backlash from their own citizens, because they are seen as being high-handed and going against the guarantee of individual liberty and freedom.

Malaysia will continue to be a strong and active participant in global efforts to fight terrorism and violent extremism, in all its forms and manifestations. Malaysia

firmly believes that terrorism has no link to any specific religion. The threat of radicalism and violent extremism exists in any religion and community.

Resolving the problem of terrorism requires strong and genuine political will. It also requires a holistic plan of action, clear and systematic line of authority, the effective involvement of non-state actors, as well as the transparent sharing of information.

ASEAN AND SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

Within the ASEAN context, Malaysia will utilize the ASEAN Institute of Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR), among others. Malaysia will also promote the role of the Southeast Asia Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) as an ASEAN project. A wider and deeper form of collaboration with other entities within the region and beyond would be pursued aggressively by SEARCCT.

Moreover, South-South Cooperation will be given renewed emphasis. The New Malaysia will be more vocal in championing the rights of small and less developed countries of the Global South and will take the lead on collaborations among the Southern countries. Malaysia will do this in various multi-lateral bodies of which it is a member, including the UN, the Commonwealth of Nations, NAM, and others.

In addition, Malaysia will revise its existing assistance programs, such as the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP), in order to optimize its potential fully. In this regard, Malaysia will look to create a new Visitors Program (perhaps named Putrajaya Fellowship) for grooming a new generation of leaders from friendly countries of the South.

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Related to the shift towards the promotion and protection of human rights in its foreign policy, the New Malaysia will also be more active in humanitarian missions in post-conflict or post-disaster situations around the world. The government will adopt a strategy to equip the relevant Malaysian CSOs with the right skills and resources to increase their capacities to operate in post-conflict or post-disaster zones.

MEDIATION

Malaysia will also look seriously into the possibility of playing a positive mediation role. Malaysia already has a good track record in this respect with regard to conflicts in the region. In post-conflict and post-disaster situations, Malaysia will engage actively with the host country to participate in a positive manner on relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction efforts.

In dealing with the security dispute in the South China Sea, Malaysia will continue to cooperate closely with other ASEAN Member States and the major powers in ensuring that security and stability can be maintained. Malaysia believes that continuous dialogue between the claimant states is a move in the right direction. Early conclusion of the Code of Conduct (COC) under the framework of ASEAN will be one of the top priorities for Malaysia.

The prime minister of Malaysia recently proposed the demilitarization of the South China Sea and for the regional waters to be turned into a region of peace, friendship and trade. Essentially, the South China Sea should be a sea of cooperation, connectivity, and community-building; not confrontation or conflict. Malaysia will actively promote this vision within ASEAN.

NON-ALIGNMENT

Malaysia wants to have good and mutually beneficial relations with all countries, including the major powers. In its relations with these, Malaysia will practice the non-aligned policy and approach.

Malaysia will cooperate with all like-minded countries that share its non-aligned philosophy, to ensure that the

world is free and fair for all countries to participate on an equal basis, without pressure from any major power.

Malaysia will review its involvement in international organizations and prioritize organizations that can help the country attain its foreign policy goals, based on its national interests. The UN will remain the key organization in which Malaysia will pursue its foreign policy agenda.

In terms of the substance of its policy, greater emphasis and prominence will be made in UN organizations and international structures that deal with issues of good governance, human rights, climate change and the SDGs.

Malaysia will also be more vocal in championing UN reform. In this regard, Malaysia's foreign policy will focus on how to make the organizations more efficient and effective. For example, Malaysia proposes that the use of veto must be supported by at least two permanent members and three non-permanent members of the Council, as well as a simple majority of the General Assembly (GA).

As one of the founding members of ASEAN, Malaysia ascribes to the central role of the regional body in pro-

moting peace and security in the region. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), for example, is a major component of the regional security architecture. Although the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and ASEAN + 3 focus more on economic cooperation, they too indirectly affect regional security. This is because

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economic prosperity is vital to the peace and stability of the region. Existing regional mechanisms will therefore continue to be important in addressing the traditional threats confronting Malaysia.

Malaysia will continue to focus on ASEAN as the most important regional organization. Malaysia, as one of the founding members, will play an increasing leadership role in ASEAN. In this connection, Malaysia will put forth a reform agenda that would make ASEAN more efficient and effective. Crucially, ASEAN can streamline and reduce the number of its approximately 1,200 meetings annually to a much more manageable number.

INTERNATIONAL TREATIES AND AGREEMENTS

Malaysia will assess its participation in international treaties in accordance with its national interests. In this regard, this administration will decide whether to continue, revise, or withdraw from commitments of trea-

ties or agreements to which Malaysia is currently party.

In the future, Malaysia will ensure that thorough and comprehensive internal processes will take place before concluding any new international agreement or ratifying any treaty. This is to guarantee that the action will be beneficial to Malaysia and will not jeopardize its interests.

Malaysia will only enter into international agreements or treaties as an equal partner, with fair terms and conditions.

ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY AND THE BLUE ECONOMY

Malaysia has always subscribed to the approach of progressive trade liberalization. New Malaysia will continue to seek improved market access for its goods and services, and at the same time attract FDI to sustain economic growth. The government will continue to address tariff and non-tariff measures in efforts to further facilitate and promote trade, as well as to better embrace investment and economic development.

Our goal continues to be to enhance the competitiveness of Malaysia's exports and to build capacity in specific targeted areas through technical cooperation and collaboration. As an open economy, Malaysia will continue to support efforts to create a fair and open global trading environment.

New Malaysia will also continue to participate and contribute actively to ensure that trade regulations and measures are fair and balanced for all. The trade dispute between the U.S. and China has escalated recently. It is expected that most economies, including ASEAN Member States, will be hit by the escalating trade war between these superpowers, due to the global market's interconnected supply chain. Therefore, Malaysia and other ASEAN member states must be prepared to handle the negative impacts and adapt to change.

To this end, New Malaysia looks forward to the many opportunities that this global predicament may bring to the shores of our region.

Efforts are required to uphold rules-based, open, and non-discriminatory platforms to ensure unequal trade relationships do not descend into new forms of colonialism, as well as to prevent the use of trade by major economies as a way of imposing demands on other governments.

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is a big part of our way of life. It encompasses an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometers and possesses major geo-strategic significance as one of the world's most used and busiest sea-lanes of communications (SLOCs).

Malaysia's Economic Diplomacy Snapshot

- As a successful trading nation, Malaysia trades with over 200 countries across the globe with ASEAN intra-trade and China being the biggest trading partners, followed by other key economies, such as the EU, the United States, and Japan;
- Malaysia aims to maintain its earned reputation as a pro-business and pro-investment nation with the ease of doing business. Speaking on May 10, 2018, Tun Mahathir assured everyone that "the new Government is business-friendly and Malaysia will be a trading nation that is friendly to everyone";
- Based on the latest 2018 World Bank annual ratings, Malaysia is ranked 15th among 190 economies in terms of the ease of doing business, representing a marked improvement from 24th place in 2017;
- Due to Malaysia's reliance on international trade, the Government of Malaysia will continue to adopt liberal trade policies and place a high emphasis on strategic regional and bilateral trade agreements;
- To date, Malaysia has established bilateral FTAs with, among others, Australia, Chile, India, Japan, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Turkey;
- At a regional level, greater focus will be given to ASEAN in its ASEAN Community era, where more initiatives will be undertaken to accelerate development in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs), as well as to enhance connectivity in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) and the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) sub-regions;
- During his recent official visit to Thailand, Tun Mahathir raised concerns on untapped intra-ASEAN trade opportunities. He believes that elevating intra-trade activities, as well as investing in strategic sectors, can further advance the economies of ASEAN member states;
- As a trading nation, Malaysia will continue to advance business-friendly policies underpinned by the philosophy of win-win partnerships and "prosper-thy-neighbor." Malaysia believes that this is vital towards achieving a prosperous and stable world, the wealth of which can be shared by all.

It has significant potential for oil and gas reserves, is rich in marine biodiversity and is as an important area for fisheries activities in the region (our blue economy!). It is very important to the coastal states surrounding it, as well as the user states plying the route for various purposes, especially trade.

As such, matters relating to the South China Sea attract interest from all players in the international community, as SLOCs are extremely significant.

With positive, proactive, and constructive management of affairs relating to the South China Sea, and with the rule of law as the basis for all conduct in relation to the Sea, we believe all of us can benefit from the great gateway that is the South China Sea.

If ASEAN has taught us anything, it is that territorial and maritime disputes must be resolved by the countries concerned through peaceful means and in accordance with the rule of law, and recognized principles of

international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

To this end, ASEAN Member States and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) on November 4th, 2002. We have also launched official consultations to establish the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), as one of the measures to ensure that peace, security and stability continue to prevail in the region.

In short, ASEAN remains one of the most important focuses for Malaysia's foreign policy. Malaysia believes that dialogue and peaceful engagement are vital to achieving mutual understanding and resolving conflicts and differences effectively. Under New Malaysia, we in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will remain committed to enhancing Malaysia's role in ensuring lasting and sustainable world peace and harmony through the promotion of democracy, freedom, and human rights. ●