

EXTREMISM

The Different Sides of Malaysia's Response to the Taliban

The Taliban's resurgence has received diverse responses from Malaysians. While other countries are facing security threats from locally-based jihadists seeking to imitate the Taliban's success, the immediate impact on Malaysia is arguably further social polarisation.

SYAZA SHUKRI

5 SEP 2021 • 6 MIN READ



Media statement by PAS commending the Taliban for liberating Afghanistan from occupying forces. Credit: YAHOO NEWS MALAYSIA

Introduction

The Taliban entered Kabul swiftly, unopposed on 15 August 2021 after more than 18 years of insurgency. The offensive that began in the spring of this year coincided with the withdrawal of American troops that was completed on 31 August 2021, before the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. 20 years ago, when news of the twin tower's collapse spread across the globe, the world saw images of Palestinians celebrating in the West Bank and in refugee camps by firing gunshots in the air.

Recently, there are similar accounts of jihadists in Yemen and Syria celebrating the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. This is unsurprising as they are members of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. Even Hamas, a Palestine-based Islamist organisation, posted on its website a congratulatory message to the Taliban for successfully liberating Afghanistan from occupying forces. Hamas deemed it as proof that the Palestinians may one day achieve the same victory over Israeli occupation. Many analysts have made the call that the Taliban's success will embolden jihadists in other countries to continue with their struggle because it may pay off in a few decades. Malaysia, a country with

arguably different sets of challenges and political system, also saw similar exuberant **Responses by Malaysian Leaders** to the Taliban as a role model.

Coincidentally, when the Taliban toppled President Ashraf Ghani's regime, Malaysia also witnessed a change in leadership. From Muhyiddin Yassin, the premiership changed hands to his deputy, Ismail Sabri Yaakob. As Malaysia experienced a vacuum in leadership, no official statement was immediately made by the government on the Taliban's takeover. Two weeks later, the new foreign minister, [Saifuddin Abdullah](#), took a cautious approach by saying that Malaysia will observe the developments in Afghanistan before recognising the Taliban. Similarly, [Zambry Abdul Kadir](#), the secretary-general of the former coalition in power, Barisan Nasional (BN), did suggest for the Malaysian government to take a wait-and-see approach based on the international community's reaction. Besides these two men, Malaysia also received a response from the Islamist party, PAS. Here, it must be emphasized that PAS is not a jihadist organisation. It is a political party that has participated in Malaysia's electoral system since 1955. However, as an Islamist party, PAS obviously empathises with the Taliban and views their struggle to implement "Islamic rule" as similar to its own objective.

Thus, three days after the fall of Kabul, PAS International Affairs and External Relations Committee chairperson, Mohd Khalil, uploaded a congratulatory message to the Taliban on various social media platforms. It was widely condemned by netizens who found it appalling that a mainstream party in Malaysia is openly supporting the Taliban when its various human rights abuses are well known. After years of being exposed to the concepts of wasatiyyah (moderation) and Islam Hadhari ("Civilisational Islam") within the social discourse, some Malaysians disagreed with the Taliban's ideology steeped in Pashtunwali (the traditional way of the Pashtun people). They viewed it as being radical from the more moderate version of Islam practiced in Malaysia. As a result of this attention, [the post was quickly deleted](#) to supposedly avoid Mohd Khalil's social media accounts from being taken down. Nonetheless, it is clear that this is not a mistake by a rogue member of PAS, as the party's president, [Hadi Awang](#) (who is also Mohd Khalil's father) took it upon himself to explain on the party's online portal that the Taliban is now a different entity than when it ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until the 2001 American invasion. Since PAS has become a more united party following the departure of progressive members in 2015, there has been no public repudiation from other party members. The Taliban is, of course, [appreciative](#) of PAS' gesture.

Hadi Awang's position is somewhat understandable given the contradictory accounts of current developments in Afghanistan. While the group's spokespersons—from Sohail Shaheen to Abdul Ghani Baradar—have reiterated their commitment to protect females and minorities, there have also been reports of supposed Taliban members going door-to-door looking for [officials who had worked with the previous government](#) despite promising them amnesty. There were also credible claims made of [summary executions](#) of civilians and former security forces.

Due to these conflicting claims, Malaysia has witnessed a polarising effect on its citizens with some supporting PAS and the Taliban takeover as part of a larger global movement to implement "Islamic rule" to replace the supposedly inferior liberal democratic system. Supporters claimed that true Islamic governance would be based on the implementation of hudud law and the strengthening of the Syariah Courts in Malaysia. Hudud law refers to fixed punishments ranging from public lashing to the amputation of hands. Implementation of hudud law has been a divisive issue in Malaysia with

appropriate in a multi-ethnic country. Nevertheless, these calls have not waned with proponents continuously demanding for its implementation in the past few years. Conversely, there are those who are rightfully wary of the Taliban given their previous atrocious record on human rights abuses. Unfortunately, these people who have publicly criticized the Taliban have been called Islamophobes for holding such opinion. Malaysians who were labelled Islamophobes even included Muslims. For example, Syed Saddiq, the young independent member of parliament, was labelled an Islamophobe by netizens despite being a Muslim after expressing his disdain over Mohd Khalil's well-wishes to the Taliban. Syed Saddiq was not the only person who was criticized after coming out with a scathing attack on the Taliban. Another prominent figure is Professor James Chin, a Malaysian scholar at the University of Tasmania. He wrote on his Twitter account that he was branded an Islamophobe for talking about the Kabul takeover. Therefore, Malaysia is arguably more divided now than in 2018 when Pakatan Harapan (PH) toppled the ruling coalition, BN. Now, any criticism against a person or movement claiming to represent Muslims would be instantly met with vitriol.

What can Malaysia do?

According to the moderation theory, a radical political group may choose to take a more moderate stance when and if it is allowed to participate in the political process. However, the Taliban has made it clear that it is not interested in having any kind of democratic system in Afghanistan. Therefore, the moderation theory within a national framework may not work on the Taliban. What might work, instead, is if we allowed the new regime to participate in an international framework. It is clear that the Taliban, especially the political commission based in Doha, has come to realise that it cannot govern a middle-size country such as Afghanistan without international support. States and non-state actors can thus use this opportunity to provide conditional financial aid to the Taliban—such as requiring girls to be allowed an education—if it wishes to access funds for the country's development. What the world needs right now is a stable Afghan government that can prevent another devastating attack like the one on Kabul airport allegedly perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State. The UN has also released a resolution urging the Taliban to ensure safe passage of Afghans wanting to leave the country.

Malaysia is only an emerging middle power, with little leverage in terms of financial aid. In what it lacks, Malaysia makes up in its position as an arguably progressive Muslim country that could influence the political agents in Afghanistan. This position is best exemplified by the call for an emergency OIC meeting as Malaysia is best seen as a mediator. Domestically, the Malaysian government may take this opportunity to buy time without being branded as either pro- or anti-Taliban. Through this intersubjectivity, Malaysia might convince the Taliban to respect human rights and simultaneously reduce the polarisation within Malaysia by deflating the spirit Islamists within the country. Rather than forcing Malaysians who support the Taliban into a figurative corner, it is better to reach out in dialogue so that the Malaysian government is not seen as illegally censoring diverse opinion.

Currently, with PAS being part of the federal government, there are still uncertainties about the future implementation of Syariah law in Malaysia. However, given PAS' record while it was in government in the last 17 months, it appears that the party recognises the limitation of governing a multi-ethnic country. Nevertheless, to placate Islamists, the government has drafted a five-year roadmap to empower Syariah law. The support for this effort has been important enough to even get the attention of UMNO, a Malay nationalist party. While it is indeed a slippery slope as the Islamists may end up

option but to find this balance soon so as not to allow the further disintegration of the Malaysian fabric.

TAGS: [EXTREMISM](#) [MALAYSIA](#)

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of [STRAT.O.SPHERE CONSULTING PTE LTD](#)

This article is published under a [Creative Commons Licence](#). Replications minimally require 1) credit authors and their institutions, and 2) credit to [STRAT.O.SPHERE CONSULTING PTE LTD](#) and include a link back to either our home page or the article URL.

AUTHOR

Syaza Shukri

Syaza Shukri is an assistant professor of political science at the International Islamic University Malaysia. Her research interests are in identity politics, democratisation, and the intersection of both. She can be reached at syazashukri@iiu.edu.my and her other thoughts are accessible on her Twitter [@syazashukri](#).

MORE IN EXTREMISM

Hijrah or Pop Islam? Implications for Malaysia

19 Jul 2021 – 6 min read

1 post →