

Malaysia Supported UN General Assembly Resolution on Syria

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Global Research, May 26, 2013

Countercurrents.org

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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It is disappointing that Malaysia chose to support the UN General Assembly resolution on Syria on 15 May 2013. Even if we did not want to vote against it — which is what 12 governments did, including Russia, China, Iran and Cuba — we could have at least abstained, together with countries such as Indonesia, India, South Africa, Brazil and 55 other sovereign states.

There is no need to reiterate that the resolution sponsored by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the US and France, among others, was terribly biased and one-sided. While it condemned the Syrian government for its “increased use of heavy weapons”, its use of “chemical weapons” and its “widespread and systematic gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms,” the resolution had hardly anything to say about the brutal violence of the militants fighting Bashar al-Assad or their human rights abuses.

The UN resolution also revealed its bias by recognizing the Syrian National Coalition “as the effective interlocutor needed for a political transition.” That the SNC is just one of many groups in a highly fragmented opposition and commands very little support within Syria itself is conveniently glossed over. Imposing the SNC upon the Syrian people in this manner is a clumsy attempt to effect a regime change of sorts.

More than the contents of the resolution, Malaysia should have taken cognizance of certain critical developments in Syria and the region in the last few months which should have persuaded us to adopt a different stand. After all, a number of other UN member states appear to have been influenced by these developments as reflected in the voting pattern on the resolution.

One, the horrendous violence perpetrated by the militants which has reached unspeakable proportions. It is not just the massacres they have committed in residential suburbs, markets, schools, universities and media centres that have shocked the world. The cruelty and barbarity of their violence has been an even greater shock. The video that has gone viral depicting a militant eating the liver of a murdered Syrian army soldier is a case in point. Even on the question of chemical weapons, it is the militants, according to UN investigator, Carla Del Ponte, who had resorted to sarin nerve gas attacks.

Two, it is now acknowledged even by the UN-Arab League mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi, that there are thousands of Muslim foreign fighters in Syria. According to some sources, they come from as many as 30 countries. Their involvement lends credence to the view that radical militants are being sponsored and supported by foreign governments and external agencies determined to oust the Bashar government by force.

Three, in the last few months it has become clear that a powerful hidden hand in the Syrian upheaval is now openly aggressing against the Syrian state. This is Israel which has conducted two bombing raids inside Syria. The direct involvement of the US, France and Britain in undermining the Syrian government through political and logistical support for the militants is also more obvious now than it was a year ago. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey provide more massive material assistance to the armed and unarmed opposition to Bashar than ever before.

Four, it is because the mortal threat to Syrian sovereignty from foreign fighters and foreign aggressors and manipulators is so stark that President Bashar's support among his people has also increased significantly. Add to this the legitimate fear that the majority of Syrians harbour about bigoted, often violent interpretations of Islam which many of the militants from abroad subscribe to and one can understand why the people are now rallying around their President. This is a factor that anyone voting on the UN resolution should have also taken into account.

The Syrian people's support for Bashar does not mean that the UN member states should ignore his excessive use of force in the course of defending his state from the threats it is facing. Neither should one downplay the tortures committed by his secret police against protesters and dissidents. Nonetheless, they should be evaluated in the context of the larger scenario that impacts upon Syria and the entire region.

It is because a number of UN member states were cognisant of the larger scenario that they chose NOT to support the lopsided resolution of 15th May 2013. It is significant that compared to August 2012 when 133 states voted for a similar resolution, this time the figure had dropped to 107. The number of abstentions had also increased substantially to 59, up from 31 nine months ago.

Malaysia should have made it 60.

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