

# US Sponsored Political Conspiracy in Malaysia? The Mysterious Case of the Sulu Sultan

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*Filipino terrorists have occupied parts of east Malaysia, and leaders in Kuala Lumpur and Manila smell indications of a political conspiracy. WikiLeaks cables show that a Malaysian opposition leader with deep ties to Washington could be a key suspect.*

Malaysia has been in the midst of an ongoing security crisis since early February, when a group of 235 rag-tag militiamen from the neighboring southern Philippines slipped into the eastern state of Sabah and began occupying several villages. While engaging police in several firefights, the insurgents beheaded and mutilated several captured Malaysian security personnel, prompting Malaysian forces to deploy fighter jets in an unprecedented air assault over the area in an operation to flush out the intruders. The gunmen call themselves the “Royal Army of the Sulu Sultanate”, representing the heirs of a long-defunct kingdom which once controlled the territory up until the late nineteenth century. The so-called Sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram III, who is believed to be directing the militant incursion from Manila, insists that Sabah is rightfully part of his kingdom and has vowed not budge on his claims even if his personnel are killed in the standoff.

Malaysians, who are preparing to vote in a pivotal general election just around the corner, have been fixated on events in Sabah as they unfold. The Philippines are soon expecting congressional elections as well, and given the timing, local analysts are wondering how exactly did this elderly self-proclaimed Sultan obtained the resources needed to establish his own private army. Both the Malaysian and Philippine governments have launched official investigations into allegations that figures within Malaysia’s political opposition had a hand in aiding the Sulu gunmen. *Reuters* cited an anonymous Filipino military officer who claimed that Sulu rebels were “invited to Sabah by a Malaysian opposition politician”.

The blame has been laid on Malaysia’s de-facto opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, who Malaysian reports say has links to Filipino insurgent networks that have long eyed the resource-rich state of Sabah in northern eastern Borneo. Local journalist Adrian Lai recently unearthed classified diplomatic cables from the US embassy in Manila brought to light by WikiLeaks, which document ties between Nur Misauri, former chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and Malaysia’s main opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

The MNLF is a political movement that pitted itself against predominately Christian Manila by seeking political autonomy for Muslim majority provinces in the islands in the southern Philippines. In 2001, Manila accused Misauri of terrorism when he led an MNLF unit that attacked an outpost of the Philippine army, prompting him to seek refuge in Sabah on the assumption that authorities in Muslim-majority Malaysia would empathize with him and block his extradition. Misauri was detained by Malaysian security forces in Sabah and sent back to the Philippines where he was jailed until 2008.

WikiLeaks cables claim that Misauri detested the Malaysian government for turning him over to Philippine authorities and that he was “*a strong advocate for the recovery of Sabah*”. The cables claim that Misauri boasted that his militias could invade Sabah in the span of two hours. WikiLeaks has also confirmed that Misauri maintained close connections to Anwar Ibrahim, and that the two had met on several occasions. A separate report issued by AFP cited US diplomatic cables that implicate a Saudi Arabian ambassador to the Philippines of funding Muslim groups seeking autonomy in the southern islands. Misauri recently criticized Philippine President Benigno Aquino for siding with Malaysia in his firm stance against the Sulu militants, warning the Aquino government of chaos if Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III is apprehended.

Anwar Ibrahim, who has vehemently denied all accusations, has long been considered a darling of the West. Mr. Ibrahim is a slippery character of sorts; he was once Malaysia’s deputy prime minister prior to being sacked for getting too close to the IMF, among other things. Anwar also has friends in high places. In recent times, Ibrahim has appealed to Carl Gershman, president of the US-Government funded foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), requesting that he send a US observer team to Malaysia to monitor the upcoming elections. Ibrahim enraged many when he stated he would support policy to protect the security of Israel, and while his political party has long received training and backing from the International Republican Institute (IRI) chaired by Republican Senator John McCain, there little doubt that Anwar – a creature of Washington’s taxpayer funded “Democracy Promotion” overseas – would be the trusted ally that the White House is looking for as it refocuses its military muscle and political influence to the Asia-Pacific region.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino has recently conceded that events in Sabah showed signs of a conspiracy. A recent statement issued by Malaysian political-scientist Dr. Chandra Muzaffar alludes to reports of Malaysian opposition figures promising land, titles and other sinecures to the Sulu Sultanate if they emerged victorious in the upcoming elections. Muzaffar argues that a security crisis in Sabah, regarded as a political stronghold for the Barisan Nasional (BN) government, could weaken the ruling parties hold over the state, leading to a hung parliament or a narrow victory for the BN, prompting in his words, “*massive street agitation which could pave the way for a regime change, which is the goal of not only the Opposition but also its foreign backers.*” When Chandra talks of “*foreign backers*”, he is referring to the US political establishment.

The MNLF, under its current chairmen Muslimin Sema, has issued statements declaring that it disagreed with the incursion into Sabah, but acknowledged that MNLF forces aligned to Misauri were present there. Reports issued by *Reuters* also cited Malaysian officials who claimed that the Sulu terrorists had links to factions that were unhappy with the Philippines’ recent peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), an Islamist MNLF offshoot. The Malaysian government facilitated these peace talks, and Misauri made no secret that he publically opposed them. *The Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported that some ten thousand MNLF fighters from the southern Philippines planned to join the insurgency in Sabah in solidarity with the Royal Sulu Army.

Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III has told media in the Philippines that he wants the United Nations, the United States and the United Kingdom to intervene in his claim over Sabah. The Sultan claims that the US must intercede, as agreed upon in a 1915 agreement signed with Washington’s then-colonial government in the Philippines that mandated the US provide “full protection” to the Sulu Sultan in exchange for exercising sovereignty over the kingdom as the colonial administration. Let’s not forget, the strategically located state of Sabah is

abundant in natural gas reserves, and its oil reserves are the third highest in the Asia-Pacific region after China and India. Sabah's fifteen oil wells produce as many as 192,000 barrels a day, while the country has holds over 4 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. In 2010, Malaysia was the world's third largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG) after Qatar and Indonesia. The Malaysian government had paid a modest annual cession payment to the Sultanate (which the Sultan argues is a "rent") since gaining independence from Britain, and one of the motivations for the Sultan's push to reclaim the territory is definitely profit-driven. While the Pentagon refocuses over 60% of its naval presence to the Asia Pacific region, conflicts of this nature – which deal with obstructions to the flow of abundant energy resources to US companies – are exactly the sort that could coax the eventual involvement of US personnel if Sabah were to deteriorate into a hotbed of Sulu-terror.

The fact that individuals in the highest levels of the Malaysian and Philippine governments are suspicious of a conspiracy does much to lend credence to the possibility. Former Malaysian PM Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, an ardent critic of Israel and US imperialism, warned months prior to the standoff in Sabah that the opposition's Western backers sought to bring Anwar Ibrahim to power through Arab Spring-style street riots and even the use of fire power, citing recent examples in Egypt and Syria where NATO states backed political opposition figures and supported al-Qaeda-linked rebels to act on their behalf in overthrowing governments they were tired of. Reports of Saudi Arabia financially supporting Philippine terrorists should also not be taken lightly, as Gulf States have moved in-step with the US and NATO as the main financiers of Salafist terrorist networks active in west Asia, north Africa and elsewhere.

Without resorting to elaborate conspiracies in the absence of hard facts, it would be entirely negligent to ignore circumstantial evidence linking Malaysian figures to this insurgency, especially considering all sources of this nature are non-Malaysian in origin. There is no doubt that the Sultan has no legitimate legal claims over Sabah since the International Court of Justice has long recognized Malaysia's rights and sovereignty over the territory, and the highly unusual timing of the Sulu operation being so close to elections in both countries will naturally be perceived as suspect. Militancy and terrorism undermines the Sultan's claims entirely and lends much credibility to suspicion that the Sultan has not acted alone. Even if the US isn't involved, the fact that a figure who received blatant US support has been implicated is significant. There is much at stake in Sabah, and in the words of the Sultan, *"The only thing that could end the conflict is an intervention."*

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