

## Malaysia risks reprisal from China over refusal to send back Uighurs

November 15, 2020

Danial Dzulkifly

KUALA LUMPUR — Putrajaya’s firm stand on not deporting Uighurs in the country to China may affect Malaysia’s ties with the Asian economic super power, a Hong Kong daily reported today.

The *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) reported several pundits commending Malaysia for doing the right thing in defending the rights of the Uighur community who are reported to face persecution in their home country, which they said could invite the Chinese government’s wrath.

Datuk Rais Husin who heads Malaysian think tank Emir Research lauded Putrajaya’s decision.

“It is the right thing to do. You don’t want to send them back to concentration camps camouflaged as re-education centres. Some may face serious persecution for just being Uighurs,” he told SCMP.

Sean R. Roberts, a professor of international development studies at the George Washington University, noted Malaysia’s bold move among other Muslim-majority nations.

“With this action, Malaysia is taking an important stance that many other states in the region, including Indonesia and Thailand, have been reluctant to take.

“It is likely to anger Beijing, but it is the responsible position,” Roberts told SCMP.

He added that this decision by Malaysia “may result” in Uighurs within South-east Asia seeking safe harbour in the country, though he acknowledged that there “is no evidence that Uighurs are presently able to flee China at all”.

SCMP reported that Uighurs who fled China to South-east Asia ultimately make their way to Turkey, another Muslim-majority country.

According to the Hong Kong paper, as many as 10,000 Uighurs ended up in Turkey between 2010 and 2016, but added that a small but “not insignificant” number are still living in South-east Asia without legal documents, especially in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

National War College professor of Southeast Asian studies Zachary Abuza said Malaysia “has long been an important node in the underground railway for Uighurs seeking to escape to Turkey”.

“While Beijing still pressures Putrajaya on this issue, they probably understand that given the political sensitivities of it, this is not an issue where Malaysia is going to cave in,” Abuza was quoted saying.

Senior fellow at the Cato Institute, Mustafa Akyol said Malaysia's position is the "beginning" of steps by other Muslim countries to "protect Uighurs from the wrath of China".

Akyol also added that while Uighurs are continuously being persecuted, "many Muslim leaders looked the other way because friendship with China pays".

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohd Redzuan Md Yusof said in September that the government will not entertain any request to extradite Uighurs to China and will allow them safe passage to a third country should they feel their safety is at risk.

Redzuan said Malaysia respects the right of sovereign countries to manage their own internal affairs, even if it recognises that the Uighurs face oppression in China.