

# Malaysia stands firm on not deporting Uygurs, risking Beijing's anger

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China rails at the United States for removing from its list of terror groups the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which Beijing blames for terror attacks in Xinjiang province, a move by Malaysia has garnered a muted response.

The Muslim-majority country in September quietly revealed in a parliamentary reply that it would never extradite Uygurs

who had fled China even if the request came directly from Beijing. There was no public announcement.

It marked the first time Malaysia had stated its position on the Uygurs and was in stark contrast to neighbouring Indonesia, which recently deported three Uygurs back to China in a move that was never publicly confirmed by either side.

Sean R. Roberts, a professor of international development studies at George Washington University, said: “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,” added Roberts, the author of the book, *The War on the Uygurs*, which was published in September.

Mustafa Akyol, a prominent Turkish writer and senior fellow at the Cato Institute focusing on Islam and modernity, said Malaysia’s position signalled the “beginning” of steps by Muslim-majority countries to “protect Uygurs from the wrath of China”.

While the persecution of Uygurs in China had grown in the past few years, “many Muslim leaders looked the other way, because friendship with China pays”, Akyol said.

Beijing’s message that countries should not meddle in one another’s domestic affairs, even if it included human rights violations, likely resonated with the leaders, he added.

Thousands of Uygurs fled China via Southeast Asia from 2010 to 2016 as a result of increased repression in the Uygur areas of China

, as “fleeing China via Central Asia” – what Uygurs had previously done – “was no longer safe” given the Central Asian states’ security cooperation with Beijing, Roberts said.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has documented serious human rights abuses against Uygurs, including mass arbitrary detention of at least 1 million, enforced disappearances, highly politicised trials ending in death sentences and torture in custody.

Beijing has denied these allegations and maintained that the camps provide vocational training to the Uygurs.

Malaysia’s position “may result” in some of the remaining Uygurs still scattered throughout Southeast Asia seeking refuge in Malaysia, Roberts said.

While most Uygurs who have fled China via Southeast Asia have ultimately sought to travel to Turkey – sources say as many as 10,000 Uygurs ended up there between 2010 and 2016 – a small but “not insignificant” number is living under the radar in Southeast Asia without documentation or refugee status, particularly in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

“There is no evidence that Uygurs are presently able to flee China at all,” Roberts said.

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A senior security source in Malaysia told *This Week In Asia* that authorities had not “detected any arrival of Uygurs this year”, and that all of the Uygurs currently living in Malaysia are “self-sponsored” postgraduate students.

Zachary Abuza, a professor of Southeast Asia studies at the National War College in Washington, said Malaysia “has long been an important node in the underground railway for Uygurs seeking to escape to Turkey” and that the country had resisted pressure from China on the issue “for many years”.

“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 said.

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**Rais Hussin, EMIR Research**

Rais Hussin, president and chief executive of Malaysian think tank EMIR Research, lauded Malaysia for standing firm on the issue.

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

Malaysia’s decision was backed by the prominent Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), which said this was a “necessary move” for humanitarian reasons.

“We welcome the minister’s statement on the Uygurs,” said ABIM vice-president Ahmad Fahmi Mohd Shamsuddin.

Malaysia's stand on the Uyghurs came without political grandstanding; it was revealed in a written parliamentary reply from Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Redzuan Md Yusof to an MP's question, which was posted on the Malaysian parliament's website.

"If there are any Uyghur refugees who flee to Malaysia for protection, Malaysia has decided to not extradite Uyghur refugees even if there is a request from the People's Republic of China," Reuters quoted Mohd Redzuan as saying in the reply.

Mohd Redzuan is a minister in Malaysia's Perikatan Nasional government, which ousted Mahathir Mohamad's coalition in a political coup at the end of February this year. In Mahathir's time as prime minister, from 2018 through February, he released 11 jailed Uyghurs, disregarding China's request to deliver them to Beijing. The move angered China, which said it was "resolutely opposed" to Malaysia sending the Uyghurs to Turkey, where they eventually ended up.

During the previous government of Najib Razak, from 2009 to 2018, at least 29 Uyghurs were deported to China, including six who had pending refugee status applications.

The HRW condemned the deportation of the six asylum seekers in 2012, calling it a "violation of international law".

Considering that China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner since 2009 and is among the top 10 countries for foreign direct investment, Malaysia's stand on the matter seems bold.

Yeah Kim Leng, an economics professor at Sunway University Business School, said China's share of foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2019 is ranked seventh but edged a notch lower in the first half of 2020.

Yeah said Malaysia's exports to China rose 7.1 per cent in the first half of 2020, and that a post-pandemic China could provide a much-needed boost for Malaysian exporters.

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited in October just after the deportation of the three Uyghurs, Pompeo urged Muslims and religious leaders there not to "look away" from the suffering of their fellow Muslims in Xinjiang.

"That the Indonesian government caved in so quickly is shocking," said Abuza of the National War College.

"Yes, China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, but I just couldn't see Beijing retaliating or boycotting Indonesian raw materials, which it desperately needs, should Jakarta have not returned the three Uyghur men."

To date, though, China's pledges of assistance, investment, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have far surpassed what has actually been committed – "pennies on the dollar", Abuza said.

China was the second-largest foreign investor in the country last year, at US\$4.7 billion – only behind Singapore’s US\$6.5 billion, according to Indonesia’s National Investment Coordinating Board.

There are currently no Uygurs in Indonesia at the moment, says Deka Anwar, research analyst for Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC).

The Indonesian government has also been reticent on the persecution of Uygurs, because it has its own separatist problems and does not want to set a precedent of foreign interference in the internal affairs of another state, said Ben Bland, director of the Southeast Asia Programme at the Lowy Institute in Australia.

China has become an increasingly important source of investment and trade for Indonesia, as well as being a key partner in the development of possible Covid-19 vaccines, said Bland.

“That inevitably gives China leverage and makes the Indonesian government reluctant to do anything that would anger Beijing but brings few direct benefits to Indonesia,” he said.