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## My Plea from Prison: Malaysia Must Choose Freedom Over Repression

By Anwar Ibrahim

Sungai Buloh Prison, Malaysia —Yesterday, Malaysia’s Federal Court heard my final appeal to reverse the injustice of my politically-motivated detention at the hands of the Malaysian government. It won’t likely issue a final decision on my case for many months. What is really at stake in Malaysia, however, is a catastrophic slide to authoritarian kleptocracy by a country that was set to be the shining example of pluralistic democracy in a multi-religious Muslim majority country. My last appeal could well be the final opportunity for Prime Minister Najib Razak and the judiciary he cynically controls to set Malaysia again on a path of restoring its much tainted reputation on the global stage. But without the support of the international community and President Obama’s help, my fate is pre-determined.

I have struggled my entire life for the betterment of my country and the improvement of the lives of Malaysia’s citizens. I am coming up on having spent 10 years of my adult life over the course multiple imprisonments in jail. I am grateful for the strong support of the United Nations and organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which have concluded I am illegally detained and have urged my immediate release. Although this has been particularly hard on my family, I am most worried about the unprecedented existential threat to Malaysia’s democracy and stability. We are at a crossroads where we can either emerge as a pluralistic democracy in Asia and in the Muslim world or where our nation will implode from grand corruption and different religious and ethnic groups being pitted against each other fighting for limited resources.

Najib’s overreach is even bringing my former political foes from the ruling party, including my political benefactor and later jailer Mahathir Mohamed, to defect to the opposition. But most democracies around the world have remained totally silent, and none have taken concrete measures to censure Najib and his government before the damage done by their corruption and authoritarianism is irreversible.

The opposition coalition I led in the 2008 elections shocked the ruling BN alliance led by the nationalist United Malay National Organization (UMNO), because a truly multi-racial and multi-religious coalition united to earn 48 percent of the popular vote. That only translated into 37 percent of the seats in the parliament, but it denied BN a two-thirds majority for the first time

since 1969. But our success led the government to frame me for crimes that I did not commit in a lengthy trial that was held over me for some six years.

So when our opposition coalition won 52 percent of the popular vote in the 2013 elections, Najib could not allow me to remain free. I was finally imprisoned by his judiciary last year. To maintain his grip on power, Najib has imposed severe restrictions on public protest, imprisoned countless people for exercising their basic rights of freedom of expression, and maintained almost total domination of the media. This government has also stoked enmity between ethnic Malay Muslims on one hand, and ethnic Chinese and Indians of Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu religious affiliations on the other.

The outcome of Malaysia's last general election in 2013 showed the political opposition and the movement for reform winning a majority of the popular vote. It demonstrated the thirst of the Malaysian people for fundamental reform of our key institutions and for genuine democracy and the rule of law. However, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front that has held onto to control of the government for the entirety of our 59 years of independence, continues to subvert our liberty and hijack our democracy. Its efforts to hold power indefinitely include the adoption of new repressive legislation and a recent attempt by its submissive Election Commission to guarantee minority rule indefinitely through newly-proposed extreme gerrymandered districts. Left unchecked, in Malaysia this will pave the way for unbridled corruption, religious extremism, and inter-communal violence.

The international community has also learned about the wanton pilfering of public funds in the Malaysian state investment fund 1MDB which is linked to close associates of Najib. According to Malaysia's auditor-general, some \$7 billion of funds are missing. The corruption in this one case amounts to over \$2,800 per Malaysian taxpayer, in a country with median income of less than \$1,500 per month. While the U.S. Department of Justice is pursuing its own cases relating to the scandal, Malaysia's own Attorney General has refused to bring any charges at all in the country where most of the crimes were committed.

A critical mass of our citizens want democracy. I have been imprisoned to stop our opposition coalition from bringing together our diverse peoples to achieve a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia.

Malaysians who want to hold Prime Minister Najib and the Malaysian government to account for their misdeeds and bring about change for the better need meaningful support from the international community.

My imprisonment is something I will endure as a necessary sacrifice in the struggle for democratization of my beloved country. However, far more is at stake for Malaysia than just my personal freedom. The question at hand is whether Malaysia, a country with immense potential, will rise to achieve it, or whether it will instead become a failed state.

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