



November 28, 2016

US Congress, Stand with Malaysians, Not Our Corrupt Government

By Nurul Izzah Anwar

Earlier this month, tens of thousands of Malaysians took to the streets to demand free and fair elections and the end of status quo's endemic corruption. While our demands are not new, our protest demonstrated the remarkable fortitude of the Malaysian people in the face of mounting oppression by Prime Minister Najib Razak.

In an attempt to prevent the rally, Najib took a page out of the dictator's playbook and ordered the preemptive arrest of 11 opposition organizers.

One of those detained is well known Malaysian activist, Maria Chin Abdullah, the 60-year-old chairwoman of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih). She remains in solitary confinement under the draconian Security Offences Act — catering to hardcore terrorists, which vaguely criminalizes activities “contrary to parliamentary democracy.”

Amnesty International has already designated those arrested as prisoners of conscience who must be released immediately and unconditionally. Abdullah joins my father, former Deputy Prime Minister and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, as one of many political prisoners in Malaysia.

Currently imprisoned on politically-motivated charges, Anwar posed a threat to the ruling regime when he championed a multi-ethnic and multi-religious opposition movement that garnered 52 percent of the votes in the 2013 parliamentary election — a victory that was ultimately rendered hollow by the government's gerrymandering.

The United Nations has denounced my father imprisonment as arbitrary and in violation of international law.

Dozens more have been targeted, harassed, or imprisoned under the false pretenses of national security simply because they dare to speak out against Najib's authoritarian tendencies and corrupt practices.

Najib's desire to quell any criticism has led him to target members of his own government.

After it became public that the U.S. Department of Justice and FBI are investigating Najib for corruption relating to the reported billions embezzled from the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB Fund) Fund, Najib sacked his deputy prime minister and the attorney general.

He also ended an internal investigation by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, and revoked the publishing licenses of newspapers.

Najib refuses to admit his guilt and instead identified the unexplained \$681 million in his bank account as a "donation" from the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Most recently, Rafizi Ramli, a fellow member of Parliament was convicted for 18 months — for disclosing investigative documents related to the 1MDB scandal.

It is clear that Najib's actions have impact outside of Malaysia. In fact, where our two countries should be most united in countering violent extremism, Najib is a serious liability.

In June 2014, he went so far as to encourage members of his political party to be brave like ISIS fighters. Extremist Islamic movements are intensifying in Malaysia, spurred on by Najib's reliance on targeting legitimate political dissenters and utilizing polarizing racial and religious extremist rhetoric in gaining support.

As Najib panders more to fundamentalist Malay-ethnocentrism in a bid to dangerously foment support, he moves Malaysia further from western democracies like the U.S., and closer to our neighbors, including China.

Earlier this month, Najib met with Chinese President Xi Jinping to conclude a staggering \$34 billion worth of deals, including an unprecedented national defense contract to purchase four Chinese naval vessels.

I do not agree with where Najib is taking our country.

I share Anwar's vision for a Malaysia, which he reiterated last month from behind bars, which celebrates our diversity and emphasizes the protection of the rights of all Malaysians. He, like so many other courageous Malaysians, has struggled for the betterment of our country and believes that Islam is fully compatible with our democratic values.

Anwar has warned that Malaysia is at a crossroads: We will either be a shining example of a moderate multi-ethnic and multi-religious state in the Muslim world or if we continue down this current path, we will become a failed state.

As the U.S. prepares transitions power to a new administration, it is a critical moment to re-examine its relationship with Malaysia.

Malaysia has historically been a critical ally of the United States in Southeast Asia, cooperating closely on trade, security, and countering violent extremism.

But it's hard to see how the man who was once a golf partner of President Barack Obama is still a dependable strategic and diplomatic partner given the repression and corruption that now characterizes his administration and creates an atmosphere ripe for radicalization of our youth.

As I meet with policymakers in Washington, I strongly encourage them to stand with the people of Malaysia and not with our Prime Minister.

Only a democratic Malaysia can be a reliable ally for the United States. If the U.S. and world leaders join forces to take concrete action, together we can end the repression, ensure Anwar's freedom and the freedom of all Malaysians, and refocus on our common priorities based on the principles of freedom, democracy, and human rights.

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