

Obama's remarks not good news to golfing buddy

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COMMENT On June 1, US President Barack Obama met a number of young leaders from Southeast Asia at the White House. At the end of his prepared remarks, he asked for questions. And first at bat was Malaysia's own Yeo Bee Yin, a member of the Selangor State Assembly.

Yeo asked him, "What is your view on democracy in Malaysia, with the recent jailing of Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition leader, and the crackdown on the opposition?"

Malaysiakini's report on Obama's response to Yeo's question said that the president was "beating around the bush," and that he continued "to shy away from criticising the Malaysian government" for jailing Anwar.

For her part, Yeo astutely told Malaysiakini that Obama's response was "perhaps diplomatically and politically correct. However, as a nation that prides itself on its democracy, I did hope that the president would speak more strongly against such abuse of power."

The transcript of the president's remarks has now been released. So we can read exactly what Obama said during his 90-minute meeting with these young Southeast Asian leaders, not just about Anwar and Malaysia, but also about democracy, human rights, religious and racial equality, and good governance in Southeast Asia as a whole.

As a former diplomat whose job was to study official statements word by word - and as a former ambassador to Malaysia, where you always had to read between the lines in the government-controlled newspapers to discern the truth - I have taken a look at what Obama had to say.

And it is not good news for Obama's golfing buddy, Najib Razak.

First, Obama said that "Malaysia has a history of democracy that has to be preserved." To use the words, "has to be preserved" means that he recognises that Malaysia's democracy is now in jeopardy. And indeed, it is.

Second, Obama said that "democracy is not just about holding elections." He said it is also about "how open, transparent, and accountable the government is between elections." But as we all know, Umno's leaders arrogantly say that once elected, they can do whatever they want for the next five years. (And as we all know, the elections that brought them to power in the first place were neither free nor fair.)

Educating Obama

Third, Obama said that to make democracy work, it is essential to have freedom of speech, freedom of the press, an independent judiciary, and the right to assemble peacefully. Najib's Malaysia fails strongly on all these counts.

Fourth, Obama said that people must have the right to say what they think. He cited George Washington and the criticism he endured and said you must respect the rights of people who disagree with you, no matter what they say.

Yet in Najib's Malaysia, people who disagree will be arrested, jailed, and charged with sedition. George Washington never did that; yet over 220 years later, Najib doesn't hesitate to do so.

Fifth, Obama said that one of the most important principles for him has always been to treat everyone fairly.

Obama said, "The one thing I know is that countries that divide themselves on racial or religious lines, they do not succeed... That's rule number one... I think one of the most important things is to put an end to discrimination against people because of what they look like or what their faith is."

Yet Najib and Umno are desperately trying to stay in power by appealing to the basest and most racist and religious instincts of the voters.

So what does all this mean?

It shows that Obama finally has shown that he has some understanding of the real situation in Malaysia. Hopefully Obama will no longer "drink Najib's Kool-Aid."

But Obama is not there yet. I fear that he still is giving Najib the benefit of the doubt. Before Obama travels to Malaysia this November for the East Asia Summit, we all have to "educate" him and help him understand the truth about Najib and the regime that he leads.

I think the key task now is for the Malaysian people - and for friends of Malaysia in the US - to hold Obama's feet to the fire. To educate him.

To show him that the Najib regime does not live up to the standards of democracy, political freedom, and racial and religious equality that Obama espoused so well in his meeting with the young Asean leaders.