

## 'Obama to Najib: Release Anwar'

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**COMMENT** I have heard from five people, both Malaysians and Americans and all in a position to know, that during his meeting with Najib Abdul Razak on Nov 20, US President Barack Obama called on the Malaysian prime minister to release former opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim from prison.

The request reportedly was made on humanitarian grounds, because of Anwar's deteriorating health. But the US government position that Anwar's trial was flawed and politically-motivated, and that Anwar is a political prisoner, is a matter of record.

One person told me that Najib's response was that he had to follow Malaysia's legal system. To me, it is ironic that Najib wants to hide behind Malaysia's legal system, because he certainly has had no hesitation to use and abuse it for his own political ends.

And it's not just against the opposition anymore. Now he's going after critics in his own party, as well as investigators who have gotten too close to the truth.

A lot has happened since the [famous golf game](#) last December. Starting with Anwar's conviction in February, there was that major front page expose in the *New York Times*, detailing all the allegations of corruption surrounding Najib and his family.

*Sarawak Report* started exposing more and more documents about 1MDB and the missing billions. The 1MDB reporting was all very complicated and convoluted, because the paper trails were hard to follow. But then *The Wall Street Journal* published an article that everyone could understand. A sum of US\$700 million (RM2.6 billion) had [allegedly ended up](#) in Najib's personal bank account, and for weeks he could not explain how it got there.

And then, just like magic, most of that money allegedly went overseas again - but no one knows where, and Najib isn't talking. Everyone could understand that story - you don't

need an MBA in international finance. Then *New York Times* reported that Najib and his family were [under investigation](#) by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under the Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative. What a name!

As for human rights and democracy, Najib's crackdown on the opposition has been reported widely in the Western press. Human Rights Watch recently put out a 151-page report on the "[climate of fear](#)" that Najib has created. Unprecedented - 151 pages! Then there was that United Nations group that recently called for Anwar's release.

Obama is a lawyer. He now understands that the evidence is overwhelming and that Najib is not the man he thought he was. As I have said before, Obama is not the only world leader who believed Najib's rhetoric of reform. But put it all together, and with all the news this year, it reached the point where Obama finally recognised the reality about both Malaysia and Najib.

### **Change in stand**

Last February we launched the [White House petition](#) on 'We, the People', which called for making Anwar's release from prison a priority for US foreign policy. That has now happened.

But that is not thanks to me or the petition, it is thanks to the great investigative reporting in the world press, on Malaysian websites, and on *Sarawak Report*. Especially, it is thanks to the courage of so many Malaysians who refuse to be intimidated by the heavy hand and threats of Malaysia's home minister and inspector-general of police (IGP).

I agree totally with what Obama told the civil society leaders whom [he just met](#) in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday. America has many interests in Malaysia - and not just the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA). It includes our longstanding trade and investment ties, military and foreign policy cooperation, and working together on so many issues like refugees, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and the environment. But I am

glad that human rights and democracy are once again on the list of our priorities in Malaysia.

I have been critical of Obama's hands-off stance on human rights in Malaysia over the past few years. But now I have to say thank you. Not only did he discuss these matters with Najib, he is the first president to actually call for Anwar's release from prison since Anwar was first jailed in 1998. Neither Bill Clinton nor George W Bush ever went that far.

I hope that this more visible and active US effort will continue, but not just to secure Anwar's freedom. We need to be even more vocal in Malaysia and around the world in addressing human rights, political freedom, and religious and racial discrimination. Free and fair elections are essential to change. Corruption, the abuse of the legal system, and special treatment for government-linked companies (GLCs) hurt American companies trying to do business in Malaysia as much as it hurts Malaysian companies.

America needs to stand clearly on the side of those Malaysians who are seeking the changes that will lead to a brighter future for Malaysia. The current trajectory - with more and more Malaysians themselves starting to refer to their own country as a "failed" or "failing" state - should be of concern to everyone, and not just Malaysians.

This needs to be a coordinated international effort, working with the UN, human rights NGOs, and like-minded governments from around the world. It should not be just America alone, for the reasons that Obama described in his talk at Taylor's University to the young Southeast Asian leaders. America should not be seen as the "nanny state", lecturing others and ignoring its own shortcomings.

Malaysia, Najib, and the ruling party need the international equivalent of a "family intervention", sort of a "Friends of Malaysia" grouping, where out of concern and love you try to break through the pattern of denial and help the person - or in this case, the country - get the "treatment" it needs before it destroys itself.

Finally, I am confident that there will always be courageous Malaysians who will continue to struggle for true democracy and political freedom, against the growing authoritarianism in their country. I hope their numbers will grow. For in the end, while the outside world can be supportive, only the Malaysian people can bring change.

As Obama said many times, "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

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