

Don't look up to Uncle Sam to fight your battle

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Philip Rodrigues

COMMENT No one knows what transpired at the closed-door meeting between Najib Abdul Razak and Barack Obama.

The prime minister of Malaysia and the president of the United States appeared to have struck chords of familiarity and cordiality in their public appearances, with the visitor not interested in poking his nose in domestic affairs. Obama came and went, hardly making any impact on the home front as far as the subject of human rights is concerned.

Obama did give his ears to the complaints of abuses perpetrated under the Najib regime when he met all those “courageous men and women” of the civil society. He seemed genuinely concerned with what Najib is doing to curtail opposition to his rule.

Then he went to see Najib and after exiting, he informed the world that he had indeed told the prime minister to root out corruption and practise transparency and accountability.

What was his tone when he delivered this “lecture”? Was it stern? Forceful? Aggressive? Did Obama wag his finger at this puny leader? Or thump the table to drive home his message? No one knows. Najib did not issue a statement (his favourite tactic) nor get up to the public podium to tell Malaysians that he is a reformed leader now.

In the absence of reliable information, let's create a fictional account of a sample of the talks the duo had behind the screen.

Obama: Mr Najib, your record on upholding human rights is very bad. Why are you clamping down on legitimate protests?

Najib: No, sir, those concerned civil society members told you a pack of lies. I was democratically elected but those trouble-makers want to destroy my government by holding illegal rallies. I am the one upholding the rule of law.

Obama: That's good. We Americans always believe in the rule of law. But what's this report about billions of dollars going into your personal bank accounts? Why are you pocketing this ill-gotten money?

Najib: No, sir, I didn't take the money. Those funds are political donations. I used them to fund the political activities of my ruling party. Even in your country you have political donations. So what's wrong with that?

Obama: Yes, that's right but I don't take money and our donations for political campaigns are transparent. Your government is seen as corrupt and you are playing with money politics to stay in power. You are crushing all dissent.

Najib: No, sir, I am not corrupt. I am working very hard to turn my country into a developed nation. For that purpose, I need money to ensure my party stays in power so that all my plans can be realised. But those rats want to ruin my goals with all their scandal-mongering. They even oppose the TPPA. They want to tear our trade pact.

Obama: That's bad. Don't let these pests do it! I'm counting on you. Will your parliament approve the pact?

Najib: Boss, I can assure you it will sail through.

Obama: How can you be so damn sure?

Najib: Sir, boss, all my MPs will vote for it because none of them understands a word of it. And I put the donation to good use.

A realisation is dawning on the Malaysian public that the world's most powerful country is not practising what it preaches. It is all hypocrisy when the US thunders from the pulpit about human rights but coddles corrupt, authoritarian leaders.

In the end all politicians are untrustworthy. They care only for their political survival and pay only lip service to all those high ideals and principles that are the life blood of a healthy democracy.

It is clear that the US cannot do much to help throw out the rubbish in the backyard of any country, especially those whose governments are oppressive, dictatorial, heavy-handed. It is also evident that the US is more interested in making money than in unmaking despotic leaders.

Trade is the main pillar in US foreign policy and any trade pact must work to the greater benefit of the American people, even if it means closing one eye to all the abuses of human rights.

The Obama story has one lesson for civil society groups: do not depend on Big Brother to bring changes to the domestic political landscape. Big Brother can only lend you his big ears but he cannot give you his heart to your cause.

The change must come from within. All concerned citizens would have to pool their resources together and bring the fight to the doorsteps of Putrajaya on their own steam.