

Where is the US when we need its help?

MalaysiaKini.com

Apr 23rd, 2016

Patricia Tan

COMMENT We live in an unprecedented time in the political life of Malaysia. The old saying 'an enemy's enemy is a friend' has literally come to life before us. The news hit everyone on March 4 when former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad went head-on with our now globally infamous Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak.

The timing of the Citizens' Declaration, coming three days after the article by the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), seemed to be a strategically laid-out plan.

Like most of us, I sort of saw the clash of titans coming (there have been endless headlines about disagreements between the former and the latter), but what I didn't expect was the line of supporters he had. The once undefeatable vociferous Dr M and his political nemeses had come together and united to oust their common enemy. From the library windows of Columbia University, I silently hoped that truth will prevail.

After the latest revelation that the political 'donation' had topped US\$1 billion and not US\$681 million in PM Najib's personal account made a front-page headline in WSJ on March 1, perhaps by now already being used to scandalous headlines about our country's leadership, public sentiment is still raging and urging the PM to come clean or quit.

WSJ, of US origin, has been one the main international newspaper outlets which covered PM Najib's and 1MDB scandal closely and consistently. In fact, less we forget that it was international journalistic intervention which has exposed this to the nation and the world. The question whether we can expect foreign intervention to play an active role in removing allegedly corrupt leaders in our political institutions is what I like to discuss in this piece.

Intrigued, I traced back the sequence of reporting by WSJ. The Malaysian public has perceived the American news outlet as credible reporting compared to that of local media. In the 4th quarter of 2015, WSJ had 24 stories on PM Najib, 1MDB or any related news where almost half of the stories were in November coinciding with President Barack Obama's visit to Malaysia.

From January till March 13, 2016, there had already been 24 news items by WSJ on this. The reports by The Edge, which had been covering 1MDB for many months before WSJ's extensive coverage, was somewhat mellow in comparison. The scandal really took off when the American news outlet (and other international outlets) stepped into the picture.

Admittedly, for the wrong reasons, the outsider role of foreign media has put the Malaysian corruption scandal on the map and provided Malaysians with sources of information other than from its highly-censored local media channels.

Interestingly, although Dr Mahathir may have relied on the foreign press to gain momentum for the clash, it was Dr M himself who coined the Asian Values rhetoric during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 to fend off US influence in the region. It was his belief that the US businessman George Soros was behind the financial collapse in the region.

Following the Citizen's Declaration by Dr M and his supporters, the only development (at least available publicly) has been the removal of Mahathir from the Petronas (National Oil Company) advisory board. PM Najib is giving the message that he is holding the fort stronger than we can imagine.

'Rebalancing strategy'

When asked about his take on the corruption scandal in Malaysian government leadership, the US president told a group of university students that "I was going to do it anyway, but now that I hear it from you, I'm definitely going to do it."

Fast forward from November to February of this year, what he did was successfully land an agreement with Malaysia and signed the long overdue (from the US point of view) Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA). Part of his 'rebalancing strategy' in South-East Asia is to counter the rise of China and this was indeed a significant milestone to Washington.

But will the US play the role of enhancing democratic values in Malaysia, as it claims to do in the Middle East, has yet to be revealed based on President's Obama silence on the issue ever since giving his word to those university students. Until the leadership of PM Najib, Malaysia has not had a close relationship with the US compared to that of our neighboring countries Myanmar and the Philippines.

In both these countries, the US had intervened in their political endeavours. Washington has been a strong advocate of Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite the support and sanctions that the US took on Myanmar's military government, it took nonetheless 26 years for 'the lady' and her party (National League for Democracy) to win the elections and take over the government.

'The lady's' win is arguable to a certain extent due to power restrictions on the military on the winning party. Even so this is extraordinary progress for Myanmar. As for the Philippines, it has one of the longest bilateral relations with the US since the 1940s. It relies on the US as the middle agent to defend its territory against China. To date, there has not been any conclusion on territorial negotiations between China and the Philippines.

Unlike Myanmar and the Philippines, Malaysia has enjoyed a somewhat steady political climate. The ties between the US and Malaysia have strengthened since PM Najib took office in 2009. Incidentally, the TPPA negotiations started in 2008 and achieved agreement seven years later is well within the leadership period of PM Najib. If the US intervenes directly on the credibility of PM Najib, the US is taking the risk of jeopardising the implementation of

the agreement.

As we take the example of Myanmar and the Philippines, having the US 'big brother' as an ally does not warrant immediate democratic success because the US has to protect its own interests.

In his interview with Financial Times back in November 2015, Ooi Kee Beng, deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, commented that, "At the moment, it is not clear who needs whom more."

The silence from the president or Washington says that the US needs Malaysia more. As a result, it may mean that Malaysians are in for the long haul like Myanmar in its struggle to achieve political justice in our system.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/338886>