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Obama Goes Easy on Najib

By Andrew Khoo

Barack Obama said Sunday that he discussed privately the importance of transparency and fighting corruption when he met with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit. But the U.S. president failed to mention the worrying rise in ethnic and religious tensions on Mr. Najib's watch.

Last year Mr. Obama praised Mr. Najib as a reformer when they played golf in the U.S. He also cited Malaysia as a model for upholding a moderate form of Islam. Events over the past year have proven Mr. Obama wrong.

Fundamentalist elements are attacking the rights of Malaysians of other faiths and nonorthodox Muslims. Malaysia has long tried to present itself as a paragon of interreligious and interracial harmony, with peoples of diverse cultures living peacefully alongside each other. That image has been shaken as a result.

In April a group of Muslim residents protested illegally against the placing of a cross on the outside of a neighborhood church, insisting it was a challenge to Islam and would sway the faith of youths in the area. The protestors, including the brother of the inspector general of police, were not charged.

In September a street protest by tens of thousands of red-shirted pro-Malay hardliners, including from within Mr. Najib's United Malays National Organization, tried to enter Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown. The police had to use water cannons to prevent a violent confrontation.

There have been no street bombings or sectarian murders in Malaysia, but intolerance is on the rise. Use of the Arabic word "Allah" for God by the Christian community, 63% of whom are indigenous peoples of Malaysia, is severely restricted by government religious authorities, who say its use is exclusively for Muslims.

Practitioners of Shiite Islam—or any form of Islam not recognized by national religious authorities—face harassment from religious law enforcement agencies. Mere deviancy from official teachings is treated as a

threat to national security akin to terrorism and invites prosecution. This is counterproductive, as attempts to delegitimize and criminalize different beliefs contributes to the growth of extremism.

Malaysia uses its ethnic and religious diversity as an excuse for repression, on the grounds that it must prevent minorities from provoking the Muslim majority. For this, President Obama praised Malaysia as a tolerant Muslim majority country.

Harassment and discrimination of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities contribute to increased social unrest and potential upheaval. A more equal and just society must accept diversity,

The U.S. president calls for transparency and accountability but fails to mention racial tensions.

not eliminate it. Sustained peace and prosperity is achieved when everyone is empowered by opportunity, not disabled by illegitimacy.

At least Mr. Obama called out Prime Minister Najib to some degree on Malaysia's failure to respect human rights and civil liberties. Over the past year the authorities suspended the publication licenses of newspapers that reported on alleged high-level corruption. The government has also imposed travel bans on leading opposition politicians and hauled in media practitioners for police questioning.

But by not mentioning the way that Mr. Najib and his allies have played the race card over the last year, Mr. Obama gave the Malaysian prime minister a pass on the most irresponsible aspects of his administration. Mr. Najib counted on the fact that Malaysia is an important trade and security partner to deter the U.S. president from speaking out. Sadly he was right.

Mr. Khoo is co-chair of the Human Rights Committee of Bar Council Malaysia, but he writes here in his personal capacity.