

Don't put all your eggs in Najib's basket, opposition tells US
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Malaysia's prime minister is in the United States this week, but the opposition got here first – with a warning that Washington should step away from the current administration and its scandals, before it's too late.

Nurul Izzah Anwar, the daughter of imprisoned opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, came to Washington last week with a simple message for officials and lawmakers: that the US should diversify its political allegiances in Malaysia, because Datuk Seri Najib Razak might not be prime minister much longer.

His visit this week, for the United Nations General Assembly, could indeed be his last, if he is forced to resign by pressure from inside his own party, the opposition and popular unrest. Najib is reeling from multiple scandals, especially the discovery that US\$700 million of illicit funds ended up in his personal bank accounts.

(Najib's allies have said the money was a personal gift from Saudi Arabia as appreciation for "championing Islam".) The sovereign wealth fund he oversees, 1Malaysia Development Bank, is facing a federal investigation in the US. Back home, Najib faces massive street protests and attacks from inside his own ruling party.

"Najib's tenure is limited," Nurul told me in an interview. "The opposition could take power... The trust deficit will be extended to the US if you put all your eggs in Najib's basket."

President Barack Obama has spent years cultivating Najib as a friend, even inviting him to play golf in Hawaii during Malaysia's last major floods. Obama needs the Malaysian government to work with him on the Trans Pacific Partnership trade pact, and the US government has been working publicly and privately with Malaysia to increase counterterrorism cooperation and spy on China in the South China Sea.

But the worse things get for Najib, the more he has been cracking down on political dissent, human rights and freedom of the press. Najib has also been appealing to more radical Islamic elements in an effort to shore up any kind of support. Nurul says Najib's campaign will come at a cost to American interests.

"You are looking at a government of Malaysia, despite their Western rhetoric, that is fanning extremism, racist sentiments, religious polarisation in their own country, which is going to be most detrimental to Malaysia and the region," she said.

The conventional wisdom in Washington is that Najib is about as pro-Western of a leader as Malaysia has to offer. There's no confidence that whoever comes next will continue the security programmes the US and Malaysia are building together now.

"That's Najib's narrative," Nurul said, "and to believe it would be not just a disservice to the opposition but really ignoring the reality on the ground."

There's a risk that Washington's continued alliance with the prime minister will sabotage the alliance with Malaysia, by alienating the opposition if it comes to power or undermining popular support for the US, which is viewed as being in league with Najib.

"That's why I'm here," she said. "The fact that Najib has lost a lot of credibility should not be lost on the United States."

The White House has gone back and forth when talking about human rights in Malaysia. When Anwar was convicted of sodomy in March, for the second time, the White House urged the Malaysia government to respect the rule of law and criticised the expansion of Malaysia's sedition laws for use against the government's critics. Nurul was investigated and briefly jailed using those laws.

But then in June, when asked about Anwar's jailing, Obama declined an opportunity to speak up for the Malaysian opposition leader.

"I have a very good relationship with Prime Minister Najib, and we are close partners and cooperating on a whole host of issues," Obama said.

"So as a general rule, I don't comment on even individual cases in this country, much less another country, because I think it's important for the legal system to work."

Obama probably won't meet Najib this week, but the president is bound to run into him in Malaysia in November, at the Asean summit.

While the international focus is on him, Najib is likely to try to capitalise on his relationship with Obama to distract from his many woes. Obama would be wise to diversify his investment – by acknowledging the opposition and their grievances while he's in town. – Bloomberg, September 29, 2015.

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