

US must have a sense of humility when talking on democracy and freedom of speech, says Obama

The Rakyat Post

November 20, 2015

By A Azim Idris

US President Barack Hussein Obama during the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Town Hall meeting in Taylor's University Lakeside Campus. — Screenshot from whitehouse.gov/live

KUALA LUMPUR, The United States (US) must have a sense humility when talking about the internal affairs of other countries, US President Barack Hussein Obama said, following calls for him to raise the issue of democracy and freedom of speech in Malaysia.

This was the president's response to requests for him to raise the matter with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak during his three-day visit in conjunction with the 27th Asean Summit.

"We always have to be a little careful because we are such a large country with a lot of influence, I think there are times sometimes when people say they don't want us meddling in their internal affairs.

"The United States has to have some humility because there are times where we did the wrong thing.

"There have been times where we have problems in our own country, and so we don't want to go tell other people what to do when back home we're not always doing what we say we should do."

Obama said this during the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Town Hall meeting in Taylor's University Lakeside Campus here this afternoon.

The president was answering to a request from a Malaysian member of the floor, who identified himself as Alphius, who asked for Najib to encourage transparency and independence in the operations of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), Public Accounts Committee (PAC), Bank Negara, and all media organisations in wake of a political scandal in the country.

However, Obama said he would highlight the issue with Najib as he believed that this was among the basic values that both countries shared.

"One of those values is that countries work best when everybody has a voice that can be respected, and that the press is able to report on what is happening in current affairs, and people can organise politically, peacefully, to try and bring about change, and that there is transparency and accountability."

Obama also pointed out that he always tried to encourage world leaders to move in the direction of transparency and accountability to empower people so that they can participate in civic life.

“And I always want to be honest to people whenever I talk to folks, that does not mean we don’t do business with countries sometimes, just because we have shared security interest, or economic interest.

“I have to meet with President Xi (Jinping) of China even though I may not agree with the approach of his government towards human rights, because China is such a big country.

“And on something like climate change and if we don’t cooperate, then we don’t solve the problem.”

On the current challenges faced by the US and his advice to other countries in avoiding its pitfalls, Obama said while its economy was robust following the recovery from the economic crisis in 2007, the country was plagued with growing economic inequality among its population which lead to more divisive politics.

“What happens when there is more inequality; people who are powerful can influence the political system to further reinforce their privilege, and it makes it harder for people to feel like they are part of the political process, so people become cynical.

“These are all problems that can be solved and I’m confident that we will eventually solve them, but right now our political system does not work as well as it should.”

He was alluding to the US political election process which has become more expensive and which lasts for longer periods.

“We spent hundreds of millions of dollars in television advertising and in all the things that go into a presidential campaign, but it is also true for members of congress.

“When politicians have to raise so much money all the time, they start listening a little bit more to the people with a bit more money as opposed to ordinary people.”

He said this was a danger that can be avoided by the political system which was set up to make sure that campaigns were not merely reliant on money.

Copyright © 2015 The Rakyat Post

Source: <http://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2015/11/20/us-must-have-humility-when-talking-on-democracy-and-freedom-of-speech-says-obama/>