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Here's What President Trump Should Tell Malaysia's Prime Minister

By Nurul Izzah Anwar

On Tuesday, President Trump will host Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in the White House. The two men will discuss cooperation on counterterrorism and economic development. But what should be foremost on the agenda is the hatred and fear fueled by Najib's own party's support of extremist groups that routinely harass and frighten the country's significant Christian, Buddhist and Hindu minorities. Any conversation with a purported partner against extremist violence who fails to address these concerns at home is pointless.

As a Malaysian, I am sorry to say that my country faces a desperate situation. For the 60 years since independence, we have been under single-party rule. The corruption scandal surrounding our sovereign wealth fund 1MDB, the largest of its kind ever investigated by the U.S. Justice Department, alleges that Najib's government routinely pilfers public funds for its own enrichment and the funding of its political survival. Our political leaders are so accustomed to power that they will do anything to keep it. Our elections are routinely corrupted just enough to maintain the ruling status quo. Print and broadcast media are more than 95 percent owned or controlled by the ruling party, and peaceful political protest is routinely a cause for detention under laws meant to fight terrorism.

I know this from first-hand experience. As an opposition member of Parliament, I was arrested under sedition laws and imprisoned with actual terror suspects simply for daring to raise questions in the legislature about the political imprisonment of my father, detained opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. Before he was thrown in jail, my father championed a multi-ethnic and multi-religious opposition movement in Malaysia that garnered 52 percent of the votes in the 2013 parliamentary election — a victory set aside because of gerrymandering. His arbitrary detention has been condemned by the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

All the while, a growing cohort of educated young people facing high unemployment is growing deeply mistrustful of their leaders. These energetic young men and women are frustrated by the absence of democratic institutions. That they may feel compelled to seek recourse for this

dissatisfaction outside the political system represents a major threat to Malaysia's future.

Tensions between different ethnic and religious groups have also reached alarming levels. Najib's ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) party has not just turned a blind eye to extremism — they have actively encouraged it. Religious extremists are permitted to promulgate their views with impunity, and the government has actually incorporated those views and personalities into its own platform. As if this weren't astonishing enough, in 2014, Najib himself encouraged his own party followers to emulate "brave" Islamic State fighters.

If Najib's autocracy and extremist actions are not condemned and resisted, all of us are at risk.

Yet despite our challenges, I love my country and I know that we have incredible potential. In fact, that is what makes this issue so important. Unlike many autocratic Muslim-majority countries, Malaysia can be a true functioning pluralistic democracy with real economic strength and growth potential. Our coalition of opposition parties follows the leadership of our imprisoned leader, Anwar Ibrahim, in asserting that the only acceptable way forward for Malaysia is as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, democratic and freedom-supporting state.

But to achieve this, the Malaysian people need the help of true friends and partners around the world. Najib must hear from every nation that his actions are a threat to international security and undermine genuine efforts at countering violent extremism.

President Trump has the opportunity to deliver this message. As a former golfing buddy of the prime minister, he has an established rapport with Najib. And Trump set a precedent in his recent recalibration of aid to Egypt, where he laudably recently recognized the opportunity to stress civil society reforms by cutting some U.S. aid to Egypt. The same frankness should be applied when assessing Najib as a potential recipient of anti-terror funding from the United States.

To advance his foreign policy goals and the mission of international security cooperation, Trump must hold Najib to account. Trump must make clear that Washington will no longer be silent when U.S.-Malaysia cooperation on countering violent extremism is undermined by the Malaysian government itself. To start, Najib should immediately cease persecution of journalists and opposition leaders, and release all political prisoners, including my father. Trump must also make clear that the United States does not tolerate partners who harbor and protect terrorists, much less partners who actively encourage such behavior.

Without reforms, the Malaysian government is not a reliable partner on counterterrorism, international security or economic development. A clear message, followed by strong action, is the only way to transform Malaysia from a liability to a credible ally.

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