

US secretary of state hails autocratic Malaysian government

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US Secretary of State John Kerry used his brief stopover in Kuala Lumpur last Friday to heap praise on the autocratic government of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Kerry made the visit after President Obama called off his tour of South East Asia, including summits in Bali and Brunei, as a result of the ongoing government shutdown in Washington. Obama's visit to Malaysia would have been the first by a US president since 1966. The US focus on Malaysia and South East Asia is part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at reasserting US dominance in the region against potential rivals, particularly China.

Kerry used his short trip, including a speech at the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, to lionise the country's Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government. He praised Malaysia as an example for multi-racial and multi-faith democracies around the world. Malaysia, he said, was "more than a market place. It is a human and economic mosaic—and it is a model for the world."

Kerry's "model" democracy is one in which Najib's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has ruled continuously through various coalitions since the country gained formal independence in 1957. Successive UMNO-led governments have clung to power through the ruthless use of police-state measures against opponents and racial-based discrimination in favour of ethnic Malays against large minorities of ethnic Chinese and Indians.

For Najib, Washington's support has been a political lifeline. In May, the BN government suffered its worst ever result, gaining 47 percent of the popular vote, compared to 50 percent for the Peoples Alliance (PA) led by Anwar Ibrahim. Due to a substantial gerrymander and alleged electoral fraud, the BN won

89 seats in the 123-member lower house of parliament and retained power.

The outcome provoked PA-led rallies throughout Malaysia involving hundreds of thousands, the largest demonstrations in Malaysia's history. Opposition leader Anwar was clearly looking for international backing to force Najib to relinquish power or make concessions, but received none. Obama personally backed the BN "win" and the US State Department brushed aside electoral "irregularities" as an internal matter.

Similarly, the US has ignored the ongoing legal persecution of Anwar, whose acquittal on bogus sodomy charges in January 2012 is now being challenged by state prosecutors. The frame-up was launched in 2008 in a bid to behead the opposition PA coalition. Najib, who met with the chief prosecution witness before the case, has attempted to posture as a democratic reformer. He "abolished" the draconian Internal Security Act, only to imbed its anti-democratic powers, including detention without trial, in other legislation.

The US response was quite different during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, which provoked a split in UMNO. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed expelled Anwar, the finance minister and deputy prime minister, and his supporters, then jailed him on trumped up charges of corruption and homosexuality. US Vice President Al Gore publicly criticised the treatment of Anwar, who had championed Washington's demands for the implementation of the International Monetary Fund's pro-market restructuring agenda.

The Obama administration has supported Najib only because his government has forged closer economic and military ties with Washington. Malaysia is part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP)—a trade

bloc in which the US has dictated the terms in a bid to undercut China's economic influence in the Asia-Pacific.

The TPP has been widely criticised in Malaysia. As Kerry was landing in Kuala Lumpur, opposition leader Anwar was speaking at a forum of opposition parties and non-government organisations denouncing Najib's negotiations over the TPP. "The United States sees the TPP as a way of controlling our economy," he said.

Kerry came to Najib's defence, noting that he had stood up for Malaysia's economic interests at last week's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. The US secretary of state declared that Washington was prepared to "be both flexible and creative in order to help countries" meet the US timetable of an agreement by the end of 2013.

Najib also faces opposition over the TPP within his own party. To avoid a challenge to his leadership at this month's UMNO conference, he made concessions to party factions hostile to his limited attempts to end race-based economic and social discrimination.

On September 14, Najib announced a \$US9.4 billion Bumiputera Economic Empowerment program to benefit only Malay and indigenous peoples (bumiputera). The measures include loans for entrepreneurs and a requirement that government contracts guarantee a share for Malay businesses.

Like all governments in the region, the BN regime is attempting to balance between economic dependence on China and the military dominance of the US. Mahathir Mohamed, who held office for two decades until 2003, often resorted to anti-Western demagoguery to whip up nationalist sentiment and shore up his rule. His successors have distanced themselves from such posturing.

Najib, who took over the UMNO leadership in 2009, has established closer military ties with the US. In a significant speech to the Malaysia Armed Forces Defence College in February 2012, Assistant Secretary of State Andrew Shapiro praised growing US-Malaysian military cooperation. He noted that in Mahathir's day, there was average of one US navy ship visit to Malaysia a year. In 2011, over 30 such visits occurred.

During a visit to Malaysia in August, US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel noted the development of the US-Malaysian military partnership, pointing out that

the two countries will conduct 75 joint activities this year.

Malaysia's strategic importance to the US lies in its position alongside the Malacca Strait—one of the world's busiest sea lanes—through which China imports much of its energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. Pentagon's planning for war against China includes maintaining US naval dominance over key "choke points" through South East Asia that could be used to mount an economic blockade.

Kerry's visit followed a state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Malaysia from October 3 to 5. Xi and Premier Li Keqiang conducted their own diplomatic offensive over the past two weeks, exploiting China's economic clout to try to counter the US "pivot."

Najib is under pressure on the economic front. Malaysia's export-dependent economy grew by only an annualised 4.3 percent in the second quarter. In June, exports contracted by 6.9 percent, the fifth month in row of decline. The country's central bank has revised growth for 2013 down from the 5-6 percent range to 4.5-5 percent.

China became Malaysia's largest trading partner in 2012 and Malaysia is Beijing's largest partner in South East Asia. Xi and Najib announced plans to increase bilateral trade from \$94.8 billion to \$160 billion by 2017. Najib enthusiastically supported Beijing's plan for an Asia Infrastructure Bank.

The visits by Kerry and Xi underline the US-China rivalry that is intensifying throughout the region amid the continuing global economic and financial turmoil.



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