

Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 401 | October 18, 2017

Malaysian Reactions and the Political Calculus of Prime Minister Najib's White House Visit

BY MATTHEW KAH WENG WONG

On September 12, 2017, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak met with US President Donald Trump in the White House as part of his three-day visit to the United States. Within Malaysia, reactions to the meeting — in terms of both optics and substance — are bitterly divided; falling mostly along political lines. Notwithstanding the domestic reactions, Trump's invitation to the controversial Malaysian prime minister and the deliberate shirking of the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) issue during the visit leave Najib in a position of perceived strength as he looks to extend his tenure as prime minister.

Matthew Wong, Former Researcher with the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “For Najib's domestic supporters and prominent government lawmakers, the meeting with Trump was seen as an unprecedented success and a legitimization of Najib as Malaysia's elected leader.”

Meeting Hailed as a Milestone to Some, a Disgrace to Others

The Trump-Najib meeting went smoothly in diplomatic terms, with both leaders treating each other warmly and discussing agreeable agenda items. In the public meeting Trump extolled Malaysia's role in investing in the United States, countering ISIS, and limiting its ties with North Korea. The Malaysian prime minister in turn offered “a strong value proposition” to the United States in terms of helping boost the US economy and being a loyal partner in eradicating terrorism. A joint statement addressed enhancing US-Malaysia defense ties, Malaysia's progress to obtain visa free status to the United States, the situation in the South China Sea, the Rohingya crisis, and protecting human rights. If there were any private disagreements, they were not leaked.

For Najib's domestic supporters and prominent government lawmakers, the meeting with Trump was seen as an unprecedented success and a legitimization of Najib as Malaysia's elected leader. The optics couldn't be better. The invitation to visit the White House was the first since former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi visited in 2004 and comes in the first year of the Trump presidency. Additionally, Najib's visit was the second by an ASEAN leader, after Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and ahead of Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong of Singapore — traditionally America's most trusted Southeast Asian partner.

Substantively, Najib's supporters saw the meeting and its deliverables as recognition of Malaysia as a key strategic partner and successful economy. In public remarks during the meeting in the Cabinet Room between the Malaysian delegation and Trump administration officials, Trump praised Najib's domestic counterterrorism efforts against ISIS, highlighted Najib's reluctance to do business with North Korea any longer, and hailed Malaysia as a big investor in the United States. Malaysia's mainstream and government-affiliated media emphasized this, crediting Najib with expanding Malaysia's international profile and role. Najib also scored a PR win with the US-Malaysia joint statement that condemned the violence

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

against ethnic Rohingyas in Myanmar, touting it as a promise kept to Malaysians to raise the issue with the United States.

This rosy picture of Najib's visit, however, did not reflect the opinions of all Malaysians. Many — especially opposition supporters — while acknowledging the importance of their leader meeting the US president, focused on Najib's personal and political gains, rather than gains for Malaysia. To them, optics surrounding the meeting were questionable. First, Najib and his entourage were alleged to have stayed at the Trump International Hotel, giving the impression that Najib sought to curry favor with Trump. Given media attention on possible conflicts of interest on the part of the US president, the decision to have a presence at the Trump hotel seemed like a calculated risk Najib was willing to take. Second, the glaring absence of a joint press conference during Najib's visit to the White House reinforced the view among Najib's opponents that he was skirting controversial questions — namely the 1MDB scandal and political repression in Malaysia.

“The glaring absence of a joint press conference during Najib's visit to the White House reinforced the view among his opponents that he was skirting controversial questions.”

In terms of deliverables, many Malaysians were dismayed by the commercial “value proposition” offered by Najib to the United States. Najib had announced that Malaysia Airlines, whose majority stake is owned by state sovereign wealth fund Khazanah Nasional, will purchase high-capacity, long-distance Boeing aircraft worth \$3 billion, with the possibility of more purchases in the future. Additionally, Najib stated that Malaysia's retirement fund, the Employers Provident Fund (EPF), intended to invest \$3–4 billion in Trump's initiative to redevelop American infrastructure. Malaysians were indignant at possible diversion of funds to the US instead of fixing deteriorating infrastructure back home. And with the rising cost of living being a sore point for many people, the political opposition ridiculed Najib as being aloof and for selling Malaysia's assets for his personal benefit. Najib's fiercest critic, former Prime Minister Mahathir laughed at the idea of a developing country helping a developed country and opined that this was another illustration of Najib giving money to obtain political support.

The importance of protecting human rights aspect in the joint statement will appear ironic to many Malaysians as the authorities have been prosecuting opposition members and dissenters and stifling civil society activism in recent years.

1MDB, the Missing Elephant in the Room

At the time of the meeting, the 1MDB scandal continued to dog Najib. The US Justice Department was in the midst of civil lawsuits seeking to seize US assets worth about \$1.7 billion linked to 1MDB. But the subject was conspicuously left out in all official proceedings. The only response from the White House communications when quizzed by reporters after the meeting was that they weren't aware of conversations that came up in the meeting.

To Najib, his political coalition, and supporters, this omission was strategically crucial because it lent legitimization to Najib's position as Malaysia's leader and it gave him a strong case to repudiate the opposition's charge linking him to the 1MDB scandal. Najib flying in to meet Trump without being denied entry or arrested by US law enforcement — as was claimed would happen by the political opposition — was spun by Najib's supporters as proof that the opposition's 1MDB allegation was nothing more than a political ploy. Domestically, Najib hopes to capitalize on this by allaying suspicious supporters and political fence-sitters have about his culpability in the scandal.

Matthew Kah Weng Wong is a former researcher at the East-West Center in Washington. He can be contacted at matthew.wongkw@gmail.com.