

Opinion Paper: Goodbye, Obama, the Best Golf Buddy Forever of Najib

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1. Global Hope – Dashed

The two greatest problems faced by the world today are inequality and climate change. Rapacious tycoons are richer than ever and the planet is warmer than ever. Obama was the man in charge of the free world when these flourished unchecked and unregulated. Elected in 2008, in the aftermath of the biggest financial crisis ever, I had hoped to see Obama implement some distributive policies to balance neoliberal capitalism. Some of us even dreamed bigger, hoping for a systemic reboot and a new global social contract under him.

It is therefore tragically ironic that the man who was elected on a platform of change never actually tried to change anything. Obama never acted to curb the global greedy policies of the few. His two terms resulted in the rich becoming a lot richer and no banker went to jail. Even into his second term, he left all the big economic thinking to his neoliberal advisers from the establishment and the banks.

He also proved to be an effective global corporate yes-man by lobbying for the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA). According to the New York Times, he put more effort on the TPPA than Obamacare. He talked a lot about principles but probably lived only by one; be a nice guy but do not rock the world economic order. At his persuasive prime, we all gullibly ate up his inspirational words and his occasional tears. Compared to some of his peers, Obama was sub-par. He had neither the clarity nor the compassion of Pope Francis. He did not possess the tenacity of Angela Merkel. For all his coolness, he was later eclipsed by an even more hip (but probably will also disappoint) Justin Trudeau. The president was a smiling sphinx, a fountain of empty empathy.

Progressives allowed it all to happen under the spell of a politically correct Democrat president. We were all so in awe with the idea of a black president. Distracted, we failed to assess, check, and question his actions and policies on merits and merits alone. In the end, his failure to tackle economic and social inequality contributed to Trump's victory. And let us not forget that in the eleventh hour, when it counted the most, he joined forces with Clinton and stopped Bernie Sanders.

In his very last days as president, he did try to do some good. With less than three months of his presidency left, he finally got the United States (US) to sign the Paris Agreement. Just two weeks ago, the Palestinian settlement issue finally mattered to him. These very late legacy padding exercises further solidify the perception that his entire presidency was one of form over substance.

2. A Legacy Tainted by 1MDB

My personal position on Obama evolved from hopeful in 2008 to disappointment in 2015. My final position on Obama, is based on my observations of his dabble into Malaysian politics. For me, the one persistent image of Obama is not the Fairy Hope poster but the picture of Obama golfing with Najib in Hawaii.

The bromance of Obama and Najib is well documented. In April 2014, Obama famously visited Najib in Malaysia; the first American president to do so since Lyndon Johnson in 1966. Thereafter, he invited Najib to a round of golf on Christmas Eve of 2014 in Hawaii. Then, at the height of the 1MDB scandal, Obama visited Najib again in November 2015.

During his first visit to Malaysia, we understood that Obama was pursuing his pivot to Asia policy and therefore he deferred to Najib's request and refused to meet Anwar Ibrahim. Back then, Anwar was a free man. For his second visit a year and a half later, he again deferred to Najib and refused to meet any opposition lawmakers. This time with Anwar locked up in jail, the Deputy Prime Minister sacked, the Attorney General replaced and the 1MDB scandal blown wide open. Prior to his visit, TIME Magazine urged Obama to stay clear of Najib. Obama's continued strong endorsement of Najib was illogical and embarrassing. Here was a Democrat president, continuing to stand by his man Najib after the whole world learnt that USD700 million was deposited into Najib's personal bank account.

Spin doctors spun that the two as kindred spirits bonded over some sort of absent father complex. Foreign policy experts argued that the readiness of Obama to engage with any leader (however corrupt he may or may not be) is a pragmatic and nuanced diplomacy. However, they may just be a third reason for this unusual bromance that is neither rooted in psychology nor Machiavellian diplomacy. The glue that seems to bond the pair may also be monetary.

On the week before Obama's second visit to Malaysia, I held a few press conferences on the controversial 1MDB solar power project in Kedah. The project involved an Obama confidante, Frank White Jr. White was the National Vice Chairman of Obama's re-election campaign of 2012. White's sister is married to Michelle Obama's cousin. According to US official filings, in April 2014 his private equity outfit received a 50% stake in a solar power project spearheaded by 1MDB. Within six months, DuSable made an easy USD69 million by flipping back the same 50% shares to 1MDB. The deal concluded on October 2014 and less than two months later, Najib and Obama shared the infamous game of golf in Hawaii on Christmas Eve.

In October 2016, the Wall Street Journal reported that the US Justice Department is probing White as part of its 1MDB kleptocracy investigations. The China government, who has replaced Obama as Najib's new best friend forever, has also acquired all the energy assets of 1MDB including the controversial solar power project. As it stands, we can safely assume that China now has all the documents and details of the deal in their hands.

3. Lesson and Final Analysis

Maybe we are all guilty of projecting way too much hope on the man. On solving global problems, I would rate him as inadequate. With 1MDB thrown into the mix, I would rate him as a political phony. He dented my faith in hope and change but he also taught me a valuable lesson. Thanks to him, I learned that we cannot just talk sweetly about change, but that we need to work industriously to achieve it.

Lastly, I believe that Obama's legacy will ultimately be decided by the incoming Trump presidency. Judging by the actions and opinions of Trump as president-elect, we can safely say that we are in for a wild rollercoaster ride and the brakes have failed. Tweet: So Dangerous!

This is where the final analysis on Obama becomes paradoxical. While Obama unintendedly contributed to give us Trump, a disastrous or dangerous Trump presidency may in return lift Obama's legacy. The next four years of Trump may just repaint a kinder picture that while Obama disappointed many of us, at least he wasn't crazy.