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Malaysia's Missed Democracy Lesson

Obama again can't find a voice for liberty and moderate Muslims.

Malaysia is in the midst of a first-class political scandal, thanks in part to reporting in this newspaper that \$700 million linked to a state-owned investment fund allegedly was transferred to the personal accounts of Prime Minister Najib Razak. Mr. Najib denies wrongdoing, and neither the original source nor ultimate destination of the money is clear.

Yet the larger scandal in Malaysia is hiding in plain sight. We're talking about the imprisonment of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who is five months into a nonappealable five-year prison sentence on trumped-up sodomy charges. Nearby we publish an op-ed by Mr. Anwar, written in his jail cell, detailing the Najib government's broader assault on the civil liberties of all Malaysians.

While Mr. Anwar's op-ed speaks for itself, it would help if others speak up for him. That goes especially for President Obama, who has long claimed an interest in cultivating the forces of moderation in the Muslim world. Too bad, then, that he refused to meet Mr. Anwar when he visited Malaysia last year, though he had time for a very public round of golf with Mr. Najib in Hawaii a few months later. Mr. Obama's reticence on behalf of political freedom in the world, from Iran in 2009 to Malaysia today, is one of the mysteries of his Presidency. Out of realpolitik or indifference, he is mute.

At a White House event in June with young South Asian leaders, he answered a pointed question about Mr. Anwar's imprisonment with a dainty answer about how "democracy is hard," adding that "it's important for America to recognize that we're not perfect, either." And what, exactly, did Mr. Obama have in mind? "I mean, the amounts of money, for example, that are involved in our elections these days is disturbing because it makes it seem as if a few people have more influence in the democracy than the many."

We often hear from friends overseas that they find U.S. foreign policy perplexing

and disheartening these days. Maybe it has something to do with a President who sees a moral equivalence between funding free speech at home and jailing a moderate opposition leader abroad.