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Obama Presses Malaysia on Transparency

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KUALA LUMPUR—President Barack Obama said he spoke to Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak during a private conversation about the importance of transparency and rooting out corruption in government.

At a news conference Sunday, the president declined to comment on investigations involving the Malaysian government. But he said he impressed upon Mr. Najib that a lack of accountability is an impediment to development.

During a town hall event on Friday, the president spoke broadly about human-rights protections and civil liberties, saying he never hesitates to raise such issues in meetings with leaders.

After meeting with Mr. Najib behind closed doors later that same day, Mr. Obama said their conversation about civil society was “constructive” but offered no specifics.



Asean leaders posed for a photo with President Barack Obama in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday.

On Sunday, Mr. Obama said he also emphasized to Mr. Najib the importance of civil society and a free press.

Mr. Najib’s government has been engulfed in a scandal involving a government investment fund founded by the

prime minister.

The fund, Malaysia Development Bhd., or 1MDB, was supposed to attract investment and stimulate Malaysia’s economy. But 1MDB now faces accusations that billions of dollars are unaccounted for

and that nearly \$700 million linked to the fund ended up in the prime minister’s alleged private accounts.

Mr. Najib has denied using the money for personal gain. The government investigation didn’t detail what happened to

the funds. Malaysia’s anticorruption body said the money was from an unnamed donor from the Middle East.

Last December, Messrs. Obama and Najib played golf together in Hawaii, an invitation the U.S. president usually extends only to a small group of aides and friends. In 2014, Mr. Obama became the first U.S. president in nearly 50 years to visit Malaysia.

Since then, Mr. Najib has come under attack from his political opponents over 1MDB. Some of the prime minister’s critics have been detained, and two publications that reported on the scandal were temporarily suspended by the government.

The Malaysian government has said Malaysia is a free country and that its people have the right to criticize officials. After meeting with the U.S. president, Mr. Najib said he would take into account some of the U.S. president’s views and concerns.

JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS