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Obama's Malaysia Opportunity

President Obama spent the weekend in Kuala Lumpur meeting with Asian leaders. The visit was billed as a tricky one for Mr. Obama, since his host, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, is engulfed in a political scandal stemming from allegations of corruption. But this offered an opportunity for Mr. Obama to score a diplomatic and moral victory for the U.S., and we'll see if he seized it.

That would be the release of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, now serving his second prison sentence on trumped-up sodomy charges. Mr. Anwar's real crime is the political threat he poses to Mr. Najib's United Malays National Organization, which has ruled the country since independence in the 1950s.

Mr. Obama has spent much of his presidency courting Mr. Najib as a "moderate" Muslim leader, inviting him for a very public round of golf in Hawaii last year. The President has also gone out of his way to avoid criticizing Mr. Najib. In June he answered a question about Mr. Anwar's jail sentence with a bromide about how "democracy is hard" and

that America is "not perfect, either."

Now Mr. Najib's political troubles seem to be causing a belated White House rethink, with adviser Ben Rhodes promising some tough talk "if we see that the type of universal values that we support are not being respected." Mr. Obama's minimum goal should be to obtain a release for Mr. Anwar to receive medical care in the U.S.

The larger prize is to push Malaysia to become a real democracy. That's what Ronald Reagan was able to do for South Korea with his qualified embrace of Chun Doo-hwan, when the Gipper offered the autocrat diplomatic support in exchange for political reform, including the release from prison of opposition leader Kim Dae-jung. Kim later became President. Reagan got something for his support. Mr. Obama has produced nothing.

The world would be well-served if a Muslim-majority country like Malaysia could follow in South Korea's footsteps. Mr. Obama would be well-served if he could follow in Reagan's.

The Reagan model for a diplomatic victory in Kuala Lumpur.