

Extensive police crackdown against opposition rally in Malaysia

By Peter Symonds
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The Malaysian government and police went to extraordinary lengths last weekend to prevent opposition groups from staging a protest march and rally in the capital Kuala Lumpur to mark “Black 14,” the anniversary of the conviction of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim on concocted charges of corruption.

Police harassment and intimidation began well before Saturday's rally. On the previous Sunday police broke up a crowd of more than 100 people who had gathered on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur to listen to Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail and other opposition leaders.

Last Friday, in a co-ordinated national operation, the police arrested three leaders of the opposition Keadilan Nasional Party (National Justice Party) formed last year by Azizah. Party youth chief Mohd Ezam was detained in Sungai Petani in the state of Kedah and youth assistant secretary Gobala Krishan was picked up in the state of Kelantan. Another five party members were arrested in Bukit Mertajam.

The police claimed that the arrests were made to “assist” in their investigations into the planned illegal gatherings. The government has imposed a blanket ban on outdoor public gatherings and rallies. Police also announced that they were seeking three other opposition leaders, including Keadilan vice-president Tian Chua who was seized last Sunday in a restaurant.

From the outset, the police had made clear that tough measures would be taken against anyone involved in the demonstrations. Kuala Lumpur city police chief Kamarudin Ali warned last Friday that the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) would be used as a “last resort”. The ISA provides for lengthy detention without trial.

On the day of the rally, the police mounted a huge

operation not just in Kuala Lumpur but in other areas. Seven Keadilan members were detained in Malacca and interrogated about their plans to attend the “Black 14” gathering in the capital and about other local gatherings. Roadblocks were established on key routes in Kuala Lumpur and heavily armed police were positioned at railway stations.

Despite the concerted police intimidation, several hundred opposition supporters gathered defiantly at the National Mosque in central Kuala Lumpur to show their opposition to the government. Police armed with batons entered the mosque, dragged several people away in handcuffs and drove the remainder onto the streets. Police sealed the mosque and trucks blocked the route of a planned march to the royal palace to present a petition to the king.

Heavily armed riot police used tear gas, water cannon and batons to break up groups of demonstrators and then chased them down side streets. An attempt by protestors to regroup at the Sogo shopping centre met with the same police response. According to police officials, 46 people were arrested and charged with illegal assembly. On Monday, a Malaysian court ordered that they be kept in custody for up to six days but failed to indict them.

Opposition leaders expressed their outrage at the government's “heavy-handed tactics”. Before his arrest, Tian Chua told the press: “The whole nation is like a police state. [Prime Minister] Mahathir is now employing the culture of fear to maintain his position.” Keadilan party member K.S. Lee stated: “The constitution says we have a right to gather and it is a basic human right. This is against the principles of democracy.”

With his customary disdain for democratic rights, Mahathir defended the police crackdown by saying that

the opposition had seats in parliament and therefore there was no need for public protests. He claimed that the rally “would damage the country's image and its economy” and then appealed for people not to support demonstrations.

The massive display of force by the government and the police is not a sign of strength but of weakness. Anwar is behind bars and is currently on trial on further charges of sodomy, which is illegal in Malaysia. Yet despite all his efforts to politically destroy his former deputy over the last 18 months, Mahathir still feels the need to clamp down on a public rally of Anwar's supporters and indeed any display of anti-government sentiment.

The government's overreaction is another indication that the break-up with Anwar and his supporters had little to do with the trumped-up charges that he faces. Rather the split reflected deep-going and persistent divisions within ruling circles in Malaysia over the policies to be pursued following the Asian financial crisis.

Mahathir sacked Anwar in September 1998 just days after imposing a series of currency and capital controls that Anwar, as finance minister, had opposed. The conflict had been brewing since the end of 1997 when Anwar pushed through a series of IMF restructuring measures that threatened to bankrupt Malaysian businesses hit hard by the economic crisis.

Mahathir expelled Anwar and his supporters from the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). When the former prime minister began to organise anti-government rallies, he was arrested and, after being held for over a week, was finally charged with corruption and sexual misconduct. He was found guilty on April 14, 1999 of corruption and sentenced to six years jail. Anwar is currently appealing the verdict.

Anwar's second trial has dragged on for much of the past year. The flimsy prosecution case rests primarily on the evidence of Anwar's former driver who claimed that Anwar and his adopted brother had sodomised him. The prosecution had to change the date on the charges twice—on the second occasion to take into account the fact that the apartment where the crime was alleged to have taken place had not been built.

Anwar alleges that the entire case was the result of a high-level conspiracy that included Mahathir and his close political associate Daim Zainuddin, who replaced

Anwar as finance minister. Anwar's defence lawyers have been attempting for the last six months to put Mahathir on the stand. At the beginning of the month, Mahathir filed an affidavit arguing why he should not have to testify in the case.

Towards the end of March, the presiding judge Arifin Jaka issued a ruling that made it virtually impossible for the defence to force Mahathir to testify. To even get Mahathir into the witness box, the defence will have to prove not only that he played a part in the alleged political plot but also that he was directly involved in fabricating the sodomy charges against Anwar.

Last week after the judge repeatedly interrupted attempts by defence lawyers to argue that Mahathir should give evidence, Anwar leapt to his feet and accused Arifin of being biased. “I want to know whether you have made a decision or not,” he yelled. Anwar refused to sit down and when threatened with a contempt of court charge, added: “You charge me with whatever you want. If you have got instructions [from the government], say you got instructions.”

The legal persecution of Anwar and the police operation against the opposition protest last weekend are part of a broader crackdown by the government on opposition supporters and newspapers. Mahathir, who faces discontent in his own ranks following UMNO's electoral losses at last year's national elections, is clearly concerned that the opposition parties will become the focus for broader discontent over the lack of basic democratic rights and the social disparities between rich and poor.

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