

Journalists in Malaysia persecuted for exposing treatment of migrant workers

By Owen Howell
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The Malaysian government is continuing its persecution of broadcaster Al Jazeera for producing a short documentary film that exposed the brutal treatment of migrant workers by authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has come after a series of government attacks on journalists and activists in recent months.

Al Jazeera, a Qatar-based news network, reported a police raid on their offices in capital city Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday last week. Malaysian police, as part of an ongoing investigation into seven journalists from the network, seized two computers from the offices. Criminal Investigation Chief Huzir Mohamed revealed that police had also raided two local TV stations, Astro and Unifitv, which aired the documentary.

The 25-minute program, titled “Locked Up in Malaysia’s Lockdown,” was broadcast on July 3. It shone a light on the mass arrest and mistreatment of thousands of undocumented migrants in Malaysia, carried out under the pretext of containing the virus and protecting public health.

Shortly after the program aired in Malaysia and internationally, the government announced an investigation of Al Jazeera for sedition, defamation, and transmitting offensive content, supposedly in violation of the country’s Communications and Multimedia Act. Officials criticised the film as being inaccurate, misleading, and unfair.

The film documented the increased military presence across Kuala Lumpur throughout the lockdown. Poor migrant neighbourhoods, in particular, were locked in by barbed wire and barricades, patrolled by armed troops. Mobile phone footage showed that testing for COVID-19 in these areas was utilised to identify illegal foreign workers and transport them to other locations; operations which the film described as “raids.”

More than 2,000 migrant workers have so far been arrested and sent to detention centres, that are fast becoming hotspots for the virus. A Pakistani man tells the film’s presenter about the physical abuse he suffered from Malaysian security forces when he was arrested with his wife and two children. Large groups of migrants, including children and the elderly, were forced to sit on the ground under the sun for hours, handcuffed and chained together, waiting for their documents to be verified.

Malaysia’s economy relies substantially on a workforce of 2.2 million migrant labourers, while 4 million more are estimated to reside there illegally, accepting the most exploited and dangerous jobs to eke out a living. Defence Minister Ismail Saabri Yaakob is shown replying to a suggestion that the government’s treatment is unjust: “Cruel? Not true... They have no rights to be in our country because they entered illegally.”

In a statement defending the journalists, Al Jazeera noted that its “101 East” series, an Asia-Pacific current affairs show that presented the film, “has a reputation for producing in-depth journalism of the highest quality. Many of its programs have been internationally recognised with prestigious awards from across the globe.”

On July 10, however, the seven staff members responsible for the film were summoned to Bukit Aman Police Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur for interrogation. National Police Chief Abdul Hamid Bador told reporters that the journalists were called in as “witnesses, not suspects” pertaining to the investigation, according to Reuters.

After the police questioning, Al Jazeera expressed “grave concerns” that its staff and the individuals interviewed in the program had faced abuse, death

threats, and the disclosure of their personal details on social media.

A Bangladeshi worker named Mohamad Rayhan Kabir, 25, who appears throughout the film, was arrested on July 24 and has been denied access to his lawyers. In the film, Rayhan expresses disgust at Malaysia's handling of migrants: "This is not the way to treat a human... This is a total, a clear act of racism... A clear act of humiliating people."

Having issued a search notice for Rayhan just four days after the program aired, the Immigration Department then revoked his work permit. Its director-general Khairul Dzaimie Daud said that Rayhan "will be deported and blacklisted from entering Malaysia forever," without specifying whether he had committed a crime.

Last week's police raid was condemned by Al Jazeera as a "troubling escalation" in the Malaysian government's crackdown on press freedom. Giles Trendle, managing director of Al Jazeera English, called on authorities to "cease this criminal investigation into our journalists... Our staff did their jobs and they've got nothing to answer for or apologise for. Journalism is not a crime."

However, the police-state treatment of Al Jazeera is only the latest example of a broader clampdown on freedom of speech and media independence, which has been intensified under Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who came to office in March.

In May, journalist Tashny Sukumaran, a correspondent from Hong Kong-based paper *South China Morning Post*, was questioned by police after reporting on the aggressive roundup of migrant workers during Malaysia's lockdown. Refugee activist Wan Noor Hayati Wan Alias was also called in about a Facebook post on the government's neglect of, and indifference towards, the living conditions facing migrants and refugees.

Satellite television provider Astro was recently fined by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission for broadcasting a 2015 Al Jazeera documentary about the notorious 2006 murder of a Mongolian woman, allegedly for containing "offensive content." Former Prime Minister Najib Razak, whose party is allied with the ruling coalition, was implicated in the murder.

Meanwhile, popular online news portal Malaysiakini

and its editor-in-chief Steven Gan are facing rare contempt of court charges from the attorney-general over remarks posted on the website's comments section critical of the Malaysian judiciary.

The mounting campaign against media freedom has provoked international outrage among press organisations and civil liberties groups.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) urged Muhyiddin's government to "stop treating journalists as criminals." Similarly, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) sent out a plea in a written statement last month: "It is urgent for Malaysia during the pandemic to prioritise the public's right to know and for the media to be able to report freely and fairly without the threat of persecution."

The coronavirus pandemic has provided the government an opportunity to limit reporters' access to events and newsmakers. Zurairi AR, assistant editor of the *Malay Mail*, has said that media outlets which are not state-owned remain barred from regular briefings. "The PM and most of the ministers have largely avoided press conferences, choosing to instead hold 'special addresses' broadcast through TV, making conversation with the government largely one-way," he remarked.

The assault on free speech in Malaysia is taking place within the context of an ongoing political crisis. Muhyiddin presides over a highly unstable governing alliance, Perikatan Nasional (PN), with the slimmest of parliamentary majorities. The suppression and intimidation of critical voices in the media, as well as political opponents, is aimed at silencing any political opposition.

Police have sent the findings of their Al Jazeera probe to the Attorney General's Chambers, which will determine whether to bring charges against the network's staff. Last Thursday, immigration authorities declined to renew the visas of the two Australian reporters, Drew Ambrose and Jenni Henderson, who directed the film.

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