Anwar's arrest intensifies Malaysia's political instability

Peter Symonds
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Protests are continuing in Malaysia after sacked deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim was arrested by heavily armed police at his home in Kuala Lumpar on Sunday night following a series of anti-government demonstrations throughout the country.

About 200 riot police, some at least armed with automatic weapons and their faces covered with balaclavas, surrounded Anwar's house around 9 pm in the midst of a press conference. Several hundred supporters initially blocked police but after an hour of negotiations Anwar was finally taken away.

Earlier in the day, Anwar denounced Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad as 'corrupt' and called for his resignation before a demonstration of more than 10,000 packed into the courtyard of the capital's main mosque. Referring to Mahathir, he told the crowd: 'The court can be bought by him, the police can be bought by him, so people don't have any rights at all.'

Anwar vigously denied the lurid sexual allegations levelled against him in the government-controlled media. He accused the police of using torture to extract confessions from his adopted brother Sukma Darmawan and a lecturer in Islamic philosophy Munawar Ahmad that he had engaged in homosexual acts with each of them.

Anwar has not been officially charged with 'sexual indecency'. Instead, he is being detained under the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA). It allows anyone who is deemed a threat to national security to be jailed for up to two years without trial.

During the day, between 50,000 and 100,000 pro-Anwar supporters took over the Commonwealth Games cultural festival in the capital to demand the ousting of Mahathir. Later in the evening, about 20,000 to 30,000 people marched on the prime minister's residence before being dispersed by riot police firing tear gas.

On Monday, clashes continued in Kuala Lumpar between pro-Anwar demonstrators and police armed with tear gas and water cannon. Anwar's wife Wan Azizah pledged to continue the anti-Mahathir protests and demonstrations. Last week Anwar held large night-time rallies in Alorstar, Malacca, Bangi and Penang. According to his supporters, the rallies ranged in size from 30,000 to 60,000.

Behind the rift between Anwar and Mahathir are sharp divisions within the capitalist class itself. Anwar was sacked on September 2 from his positions of finance minister and deputy prime minister just one day after Mahathir announced a series of sweeping new measures aimed at imposing tight regulations over Malaysia's money markets, currency exchange and share trading.

Mahathir has put the tough controls in place as part of plans to stimulate the economy and to bail out companies and corporations hit hard by the country's economic recession and the fall in the value of shares and the currency over the last year. Mahathir has repeatedly denounced the International Monetary Fund, foreign speculators and major powers like the US for Malaysia's economic crisis.

Anwar, on the other hand, has consistently backed the IMF's demands for the dismantling of government economic regulation and the opening up of the Malaysian economy to international investors. His denunciation of 'corruption' reflects the interests of those elements of the capitalist class who have not benefitted from the close ties between big business, government and the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

But as he has been backed into a corner by the government, Anwar has resorted to increasingly strident attacks on Mahathir and to populist appeals for

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greater democratic rights. Of course, until three weeks ago, Anwar was Mahathir's deputy and part of a regime which has not hestitated to ruthlessly suppress any opposition using a battery of repressive laws including the ISA.

Anwar initially delayed calling any public protests, fearing the explosive consequences of initiating a movement against Mahathir and UMNO, which has held power continuously since 1957 when Malaysia was granted formal independence. As in Indonesia, social unrest threatens to undermine the whole political framework through which the capitalist class has ruled over the last four decades.

After a decade of rapid economic growth, Malaysia is now mired in recession. According to official estimates, unemployment will more than double from 2.7 percent in 1997 to as high as 6.7 percent this year, reaching nearly 600,000. Manufacturing industry is likely to slump from 12.5 percent growth in 1997 to negative 3.4 percent in 1998, and construction from 10.6 percent to negative 3.2 percent.

Rising unemployment and poverty is helping to fuel anti-government opposition. That is why Mahathir, even before the close of the Commonwealth Games last night, moved to clamp down on the protests by arresting Anwar and declaring demonstrations by his followers illegal.

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