

Sharp clashes between police and demonstrators in Malaysia

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Several thousand demonstrators clashed with riot police in the Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur last Saturday as part of continuing protests against the jailing of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and for the reform of the country's anti-democratic laws.

Anwar is being held without bail on trumped-up charges of corruption and homosexual conduct, after being sacked from his ministerial position and expelled from the ruling United National Malay Organisation by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad last month.

Opposition and human rights spokesmen said the clashes, the most violent since the arrest of Anwar on September 20, occurred when police used a stinging spray to break up a peaceful demonstration in the city centre and attacked a mosque in the Malay suburb of Kampong Baru with tear gas.

Parliamentary opposition leader Lim Kit Siang issued a statement saying that the fighting broke out because of 'very cruel police handling of unarmed and peaceable people'.

Many of the police involved were in plain clothes and some wore balaclavas. According to police, at least 241 people were arrested. But press reports put the number of arrests at 400 and described arbitrary assaults on demonstrators and passers-by. Several women were among those arrested.

The demonstration on Saturday took place despite the fact that pro-Anwar rallies had been declared illegal. Police warned of a crackdown and said that any demonstrators would be detained under the country's severe Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial for up to two years.

Mahathir, who also serves as home minister, clearly ordered the attack on protesters. He later defended the police violence, claiming that some demonstrators had

been armed with petrol bombs and used women and children as shields. 'Don't blame the police if children are burnt during the rioting,' he said.

But his increasingly desperate resort to police measures to suppress the continuing protests is one indication of the fragility of Mahathir's grip on power. Behind the apparently monolithic support for Mahathir, there are a number of signs that deep rifts exist in UMNO and in Malaysian ruling circles over the policies being pursued by his government.

Just months ago, Mahathir was dropping hints to the press that he was preparing for an early election to be called in the immediate aftermath of the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. Now the plans have been all but shelved at least until next year.

Despite the expulsion of Anwar and a purge of his supporters from UMNO, Mahathir has still not appointed anyone to the key post of deputy prime minister--an indication of divisions and rivalries within the party as to who will become his appointed successor.

Furthermore, Mahathir's eldest daughter has denounced the establishment of the Anti-Homosexual Volunteers Movement by Mahathir supporter and UMNO Supreme Council member Ibrahim Ali--a political move designed to witchhunt homosexuals and poison the atmosphere for Anwar's trial on November 2. Ms Marina Mahathir is president of the Malaysian Aids Council.

The political crisis is certain to deepen when Malaysia hosts the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit in November. Filipino President Estrada and Indonesian President Habibie have both criticised the treatment of Anwar. The US Administration has indicated that President Clinton will not hold any personal talks with Mahathir in the course

of the APEC meeting.

The political crisis has not been sparked by Anwar's alleged corruption or involvement in homosexual acts but reflects deep divisions in ruling circles over the policies to be pursued in response to the deepening economic crisis in Asia and internationally.

As finance minister Anwar publicly blamed Malaysia's economic crisis on favoritism in bank loans, government bail-outs for cronies and overspending on massive infrastructure projects. In line with the demands of the IMF and world money markets, he pushed for a further opening up and deregulation of the Malaysian economy--moves which adversely affected sections of Malaysian big business with close links to UMNO.

Anwar increasingly clashed with Mahathir who attacked international speculators and the major powers for Malaysia's economic problems and called for the tighter regulation of capital flows. Just prior to Anwar's sacking, Mahathir scrapped the austerity measures, limited short term capital flows, fixed the ringgit at 3.8 to the US dollar and cut overseas trade in the Malaysian dollar.

In the state budget released last Friday, Mahathir, who took over as finance minister, announced huge tax concessions for Malaysian businesses. Dressed up as a changeover to a new tax system for the year 2000, he proclaimed that taxes for companies in 1999 would be waived altogether.

In his budget speech, Mahathir made clear that he was appealing for support on the basis of his economic program. 'I stress that the government has acted in the interests of the nation to preserve the gains we have made over four decades of our economic development. With your continued support, we can together look to the future with confidence,' he said.

But while Mahathir may temporarily have shored up political support within UMNO, his political strategy has only paved the way for far deeper rifts and crises in the not-too-distant future. The recession in Malaysia has severely undermined sections of big business and the living standards of the Malay middle class on which UMNO relied for its political support.

Tax breaks, lower interest rates and other financial assistance have provided some immediate relief for UMNO's social base. Any deepening of Malaysia's economic crisis will see Mahathir's backing rapidly

evaporate. Furthermore by jailing Anwar, Mahathir has opened up deep divisions in the ruling class, and provoked continuing protests which threaten to trigger a broader movement among workers and the masses that neither the government, Anwar or the various opposition parties can control.

See Also:

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[3 October 1998]



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