Riot police surround Anwar's trial in Malaysia

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The trial of Malaysia's former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim began in Kuala Lumpur on Monday amidst extraordinary police measures. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's government is determined to suppress any show of popular support for the accused.

Hundreds of police armed with automatic rifles and clad in field uniforms formed a ring around the courthouse. Anti-riot police and water cannon were stationed in nearby streets as protestors shouted anti-government slogans. By lunchtime, the size of the demonstration had swelled to more than 1,000.

Anwar pleaded not guilty to four charges of corruption--the first from a total of ten charges of corruption and sexual misconduct. He was arrested on September 20 under Malaysia's draconian internal security laws after he initiated an anti-government 'reform' movement following his dismissal as deputy prime minister and his expulsion from the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

As the court proceedings got underway Malaysia's Attorney General Mohta Abdullah announced that further charges of sexual misconduct would probably be laid when the current cases were heard. If found guilty Anwar faces a fine and a jail term of up to 14 years on corruption charges, as well as flogging and a 20-year jail sentence on charges of sodomy.

Mahathir has already preempted the outcome of the trial, stating publicly his confidence that the trial would proceed and that Anwar would be convicted.

A further indication of the character of the trial was revealed in the remarks of High Court judge Abdul Wahab Parail. In ruling on a bail application by Anwar's lawyers, the judge rejected out of hand any argument that the charges against Anwar were part of a political conspiracy. Such far-reaching and scandalous allegations, he said, were as credible 'as being told an alien spaceship...had landed in Merdeka Square (in Kuala Lumpur)' and had been raised 'to be sensational and keep alive a wholly unsupportable application'.

The trial has attracted considerable international attention but the Mahathir government ensured that few observers would be able to attend. Foreign diplomats, human rights groups, three Philippines congressmen and the Malaysian Bar Council were denied the entry to the court by presiding High Court Judge Augustine Paul who said their presence would be an insult and give the impression that the court may not be dispensing justice.

Behind the dismissal and arrest of Anwar lie deep divisions within the Malaysian ruling class over the economic policies to be adopted to deal with the country's economic slump. Anwar has championed the IMF demands for austerity measures and an opening up of the Malaysian economy, while Mahathir defends those sections of big business that have accumulated their wealth under UMNO's patronage and have been hardest hit by these 'market reforms'. As soon as Mahathir took over as finance minister he reversed Anwar's austerity measures and placed restrictions on capital flows and local currency speculation.

Anwar's trial is simply deepening the political turmoil engulfing the Mahathir regime. The government's fragility is revealed by the extraordinary zeal with which it has attempted to stamp out any public support for Anwar and to block coverage of the trial itself.

The police have threatened to arrest any demonstrators under the Internal Security Act, which provides for detention without trial for up to two years. Already so-called ringleaders have been imprisoned under the ISA.

Mahathir and the police have accused protesters of using children as 'a shield' against the attacks of the riot police. Head of the country's Criminal Investigation Unit Yaacub Amin threatened to seize any children brought to protests and to prosecute their parents for child abuse under child welfare laws.

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Taxi drivers have been forbidden to discuss politics with their passengers and to play cassette tapes of Anwar's speeches.

Students who participate in protests have been warned that they will be expelled from colleges. Public servants have been told they will be sacked.

Conveniently for the government, the trial will recess from November 15 to 18 so as not to clash with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit being held in Kuala Lumpur.

Already a number of APEC participants have condemned Anwar's treatment. The Clinton administration has said the usual personal meeting between the US president and Mahathir, as the leader of the host country, will not go ahead. The heads of the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia have also criticised Anwar's arrest.

Their concern is not primarily with Anwar's fate but with the economic policies that he pursued. The fear in financial circles is that Mahathir's decision to institute capital and monetary controls, if it is copied in other countries, will only precipitate further economic turmoil and intensify the recession spreading through the world economy.

Already big business is threatening to pull out of Malaysia, according a recent article in the *Australian Financial Review*. The newspaper stated that 'political uncertainty' in the country was making other ASEAN nations more competitive, citing a banker who said Australian companies were unlikely to expand current investments in Malaysia but were looking to Thailand and other places.

Whatever the final outcome of the trial, it is certain to intensify the crisis surrounding the Mahathir government.

See Also:
Deepening political crisis in Malaysia
Behind the sacking and arrest of Anwar Ibrahim
[3 October 1998]

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