An exchange on Anwar's trial in Malaysia

14 November 1998

To the *WSWS*

The article 'Malaysia: Anwar's trial backfires on Mahathir' was well written by the writer. Whoever (foreigners) reads this story definitely will believe that Mahathir is not a suitable leader and also have a bad impression about Malaysia. Personally I feel every government/leadership all over the world has good and also bad points to it. In the Malaysian government/leadership, the amount of good points exceeds the bad points. Has the writer personally been to Malaysia and seen for himself the progress in the country brought by the present leadership? Has he really seen the harmonious relationship between all races in Malaysia? This kind of news is really very damaging for Malaysia and all Malaysians. When we Malaysians feel that the present leadership is not suitable to run the country we can always show it when the elections come. We do really have the power to make the change. We really don't need foreigners to write all sorts of nonsense and spoil Malaysia's image. Anwar is a racist. He is basically using religion to get his support from the people. I fully support Mahathir's leadership.

From K in Malaysia

Dear K,

Let me say from the outset that I do not agree with the criticisms contained in your email to the World Socialist Web Site concerning my article 'Malaysia: Anwar's trial backfires on Mahathir'.

You have chosen to dismiss the article as 'nonsense' but fail to point to any inaccuracies or raise any particular disagreements. The reason for your opposition, as you so bluntly state, is that you fully support Mahathir and his policies and disagree with Anwar.

The *WSWS* supports neither Mahathir nor Anwar. Both are representatives not of Malaysia as a whole but of different sections of the ruling elites and big business. Their conflict, which began to emerge as Malaysia headed towards recession in mid-1997, is over the direction of economic policy. Mahathir opposed the pro-IMF program which Anwar as finance minister was championing. Anwar was sacked from his positions the day after Mahathir announced a series of new regulatory measures to try to control financial speculation.

Neither of the two competing cliques has any solution to the rising levels of unemployment and the falling living standards which now affect broad layers of working people in Malaysia. The so-called progress which you point to in Malaysia has proved to be rather temporary. Like other so-called 'tigers' in Asia and Latin America, Malaysia's economic growth depended on encouraging the inflow of foreign investment to exploit cheap local labour. Like the rest of the Asian miracle, this has now evaporated virtually overnight.

You say that Anwar is a racist who uses Islam to gain a base of support. I could not agree more. However it is not just Anwar but the entire UMNO leadership including Mahathir which base themselves on the promotion of racialist policies. Since its formation UMNO has called for discriminatory policies in favour of Malays at the expense of the ethnic Chinese and Indians in Malaysia.

In the 1960s, Mahathir was in the forefront of those within UMNO who demanded the then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman taken an even more racialist stance in favour of Malays. Anwar, who was a student leader at the time, supported Mahathir. In the aftermath of the 1969 race riots, the New Economic Policy, which aimed at fostering Malay businessmen and a Malay middle class, incorporated many of their demands.

It is no accident that Mahathir recruited Anwar to UMNO shortly after becoming prime minister in 1982, and assisted in his rapid promotion in the party. Notwithstanding their present sharp disagreements over economic policy, both men share a common outlook and history based in Malay racial politics and

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communalism.

If you disagree with racism then you might stop to consider why it has dominated so much of Malaysian political life for so long. Since formal independence from the British in 1957, the Malaysian capitalist class has failed to carry out even the most basic democratic reforms and to meet the social needs of the majority of Malaysians. Its political representatives have used the same methods as the British colonialists to cling to power--a combination of communalist politics to divide working people against one another, and outright police repression.

You claim that Malaysians can express their opposition to Mahathir through elections. But even by bourgeois standards, the Malaysian electoral system is hardly democratic. UMNO and the ruling coalition have won every election since 1957 through a gerrymander which permits huge disparities between small rural seats and large urban ones.

Moreover UMNO has used all manner of skullduggery to maintain its position. One of the most blatant examples was its response to the gains made by opposition parties in the 1969 elections. As the opposition celebrated, gangs of Malays, in all likelihood instigated by UMNO leaders, took to the streets attacking and killing ethnic Chinese. The government then used the riots as a pretext to declare a state of emergency, to throw opposition leaders in jail and to rule through its own self-appointed emergency committee for the next year and a half.

Mahathir's use of a sex scandal to throw Anwar in jail is in line with the way in which factional differences have been settled in the past. In exposing the anti-democratic methods of Mahathir we do not support Anwar. But if the government can do this to a deputy prime minister then far more ruthless means will be used against any opposition by workers.

The working class cannot put its political trust in Mahathir, Anwar or any of the bourgeois opposition parties. In the final analysis, all of them defend the present organisation of society based on private profit which has resulted in a widening gulf between rich and poor. Workers have to reject all attempts to divide them on racial lines, and to begin to unify and fight for their own independent class interests which lie in the complete reorganisation of society along socialist lines.

For a more complete analysis of the particular conflict between Mahathir and Anwar, I would suggest you read the article 'Deepening political crisis in Malaysia: Behind the sacking and arrest of Anwar Ibrahim' posted on the *WSWS* on October 3.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Symonds,

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See Also:

Anwar's trial backfires on Mahathir

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