

Anti-Mahathir protests greet APEC leaders in Malaysia

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Over the weekend, thousands of people clashed with Malaysia police in the capital of Kuala Lumpur as protests continued over the arrest and trial of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and demands for democratic reforms or 'reformasi'.

Many of the slogans were designed to appeal to Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders who are currently meeting in the city. Banners proclaimed 'APEC leaders Do Something' and 'Thanks Habibie and Estrada for your support'. An estimated 3,000 demonstrators chanted 'Clinton arrest Mahathir, Clinton save us from Mahathir' as they marched to the downtown hotel where US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was staying.

Anwar himself displayed a similar orientation toward the 'major powers'. Last week he criticised Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad for losing the support of these powers. Anwar's wife Dr Wan Azizah held much-publicised talks with Albright and Canadian foreign and trade ministers, Lloyd Axworthy and Sergio Marchi, who all refused to meet privately with Mahathir. During the APEC meetings, US vice-president Al Gore openly proclaimed his support for the 'reformasi' movement.

The opposition of the US, Canada and other powers to Mahathir has nothing to do with meeting the genuine aspirations of workers, students and sections of the middle class for democratic rights and decent living standards. For years these same administrations supported the Mahathir government as it ruthlessly stamped out even the most limited forms of opposition to its rule. Their support for Anwar is bound up with his advocacy of the demands of the IMF and international finance capital for greater 'market reforms' in Malaysia.

To bolster his popular support, Anwar has stridently

denounced the Mahathir regime, accusing it of 'corruption' and 'nepotism'. Last week, he also accused the prime minister of spending \$100 million on a private jet and a new official residence. 'The people can see for themselves how the prime minister lives in his glittering palace and flies in his sophisticated executive jet,' he said in a statement read to the press by his wife.

Yet for more than a decade, Anwar was part of the leading circles of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) serving as finance minister and deputy prime minister. The sudden split between Mahathir and his anointed successor is not about a new found concern over the vast accumulation of wealth by UMNO leaders, nor is it about the charges of sedition and sexual misconduct levelled against Anwar.

Behind these savage attacks is a bitter factional fight in ruling circles over the direction of economic policy as the country slides deeper into recession. Anwar was sacked in early September right at the point when Mahathir introduced a series of new tight controls on the country's monetary and financial system aimed at rescuing floundering businesses--many with close links to UMNO.

The course of Anwar's trial, which has recessed during the APEC meeting, makes clear the trumped-up character of the charges against him. As week two of the case ended last Friday, a shift in the course of proceedings and the attitude of the presiding judge Augustine Paul towards the accused and his defence lawyers was clearly discernible.

The first week of the court hearing proved to be a disaster for the prosecution and thus for Mahathir. Under pressure from defence lawyers, the prosecution witness Special Branch chief Mohamad Said Awang admitted he would lie under oath if ordered to do so. He also revealed the existence of documents he had

written to Mahathir last August dismissing as unfounded allegations made by two witnesses against Anwar.

One of the documents was produced in court, and the judge supported demands by Anwar's defence that a second document be made available. Also written by Said, the report is alleged to contain details of the involvement of cabinet members close to Mahathir in encouraging the two witnesses to accuse Anwar of sodomy--a serious crime under Malaysian law.

The court case, which is receiving considerable international media attention, was rapidly turning into a nightmare for the Mahathir government. Clearly the matter was discussed in the top legal and political circles and by the beginning of the second week a strategy of damage control was evident in the actions of the judge and prosecution.

Firstly, the prosecution reported that no second document could be found. Special Branch simply denied that such a document had ever existed.

Secondly, last Wednesday, Judge Augustine Paul blocked defence questions aimed at further developing the argument that Anwar was the victim of a high level political conspiracy. He ruled that the line of questioning had no bearing on the case and declared: 'Even if you manage to prove there was a conspiracy, my job at the end of the day is to see whether sufficient evidence has been (presented) in relevance to the charge.'

This extraordinary decision effectively prevents Anwar's lawyers from pursuing his central defence. Even before the case opened there was ample evidence that the charges, if not completely concocted, at the very least had been instigated by the police to suit the immediate political purposes of Mahathir in his conflicts with Anwar over economic policy. Yet the judge has ruled evidence of the direct involvement of Mahathir and his close cronies in the case to be irrelevant.

Ironically Anwar is charged with conspiring with police to compel two witnesses to withdraw their allegations against him.

Thirdly, the judge issued a gag order forbidding Anwar from making public statements about the trial, after the chief prosecutor objected to remarks printed in the *Star* newspaper. 'Please advise your client to avoid speaking about the case, especially as everything that

one says gets picked up,' he told the defence lawyers.

The turn in the trial underscores both the contrived nature of the charges against Anwar and the politically explosive character of the case. A failure of the judge to convict Anwar or worse, the public exposure of a top-level conspiracy against the former deputy prime minister would have politically damaging consequences for Mahathir and his government.

See Also:

Malaysia: Anwar's trial backfires on Mahathir
[10 November 1998]

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