

Unanswered questions over the police bashing of Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim

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6 March 1999

The official public inquiry being conducted in Malaysia into the bashing of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in police custody last September has finally revealed who carried out the attack, but at the same time has left the most essential questions unanswered.

Last Sunday former inspector general of police Abdul Rahim Noor admitted for the first time that he had personally assaulted Anwar on September 20, the night of Anwar's arrest. Rahim repeatedly hit Anwar on the head, neck and arm so hard that bruising and a black eye were still evident nine days later when he appeared in court.

Rahim claimed through his lawyer that he "lost his cool" when Anwar provocatively called him the "father of all dogs". But Anwar was blindfolded and handcuffed at the time and hardly in a position to recognise who was in the room, let alone to direct insults at a particular individual. According to other senior police officers, Rahim had ordered Anwar to be bound before he entered the room and hit him.

Even the lead investigator was forced to conclude in his report on Thursday that Rahim had assaulted "a defenceless person" without provocation. The inquiry, which only has the power to make recommendations, not to prosecute, is yet to bring down its findings.

In his testimony, Rahim claimed that he had not hit Anwar on the orders of the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. But his comments beg the question: what exactly was the role of the prime minister in the arrest of his main political rival? Just three weeks prior to the physical attack, on September 2, Mahathir had sacked his deputy and finance minister after bitter disagreements over the implementation of currency and capital controls.

At the time of Anwar's detention, Mahathir was the

home minister and therefore had overall responsibility for the police. It is inconceivable that Mahathir did not discuss in detail the decision to make such a politically sensitive arrest with his head of police, particularly as the operation was to be carried out amid the largest anti-government protests seen in Malaysia in years.

On September 20, speaking before a crowd of at least 40,000 in central Kuala Lumpur, Anwar had for the first time called for Mahathir's resignation. That evening, heavily-armed police broke into Anwar's home while he was speaking with journalists and supporters.

Mahathir and his government have been desperately trying to cover-up the circumstances of the arrest ever since. Four days after Anwar's detention, Rahim falsely told the media that Anwar was "safe and sound". After Anwar's first court appearance, Mahathir dismissed questions about police brutality, saying the injuries could have been self-inflicted to gain public sympathy.

An internal inquiry dragged on until the end of the year, and the government refused to release the report for weeks. On January 5, Attorney-General Mohtar Abdullah finally admitted that the police were responsible for Anwar's injuries, adding that none of the police involved could be identified. Two days later, Rahim assumed responsibility for the police actions and tendered his resignation. Under considerable public pressure and facing dissension within the ruling coalition, the government was forced to announce a further public investigation.

Rahim's testimony before the public inquiry last Tuesday provided an insight into the social and political tensions mounting in Malaysia last September. The ex-police chief had clearly been shocked at the size of the movement behind Anwar and was acutely aware of the social unrest in neighbouring Indonesia, where

Suharto had been forced to resign just months before.

"We were practically caught with our pants down," Rahim told the panel. "A storm was brewing. The crowds were getting bigger after late-afternoon prayers. Just before evening prayers, crowds from the national mosque started spilling over into Merdeka Square. Anwar was making fiery speeches. From there, the crowd of 40,000 to 60,000 moved their activities to PWTC [a building next to UMNO headquarters]. Uppermost in our minds was to prevent the riots in Jakarta from spilling over here at any cost."

Rahim explained that he had met with three other senior officers on the afternoon of September 20. "We felt a shortage of manpower to handle the situation and asked whether we should seek the assistance of the army to avoid bloodshed which occurred in Jakarta... We also discussed whether to impose a curfew that night or the following day." Not only did the police chief draft a letter to the army, but he sought police reinforcements from the states of Selangor and Malacca, as well as riot police from Penang and Johor and paramilitary units.

The Mahathir government was terrified of the eruption of widespread anti-government protests. Anwar himself held the same fears and had only belatedly and reluctantly begun to appeal for popular support. To detain Anwar under such turbulent circumstances was clearly a political decision with broad ramifications and had to have been taken at the highest levels.

The basis of the arrest further confirms its political character. Anwar was detained under the country's notorious Internal Security Act, which provides for indefinite detention without trial for breaches of national security. Only later was Anwar charged with sexual misconduct and corruption, and the lurid details of the allegations splashed throughout Malaysia's government-run media.

The public inquiry into the assault on Anwar has done little more than identify a convenient fall guy. Far broader issues are raised for the working class about the authoritarian character of capitalist rule in Malaysia and the lack of the most basic democratic rights. After all, if the former deputy prime minister can be treated in such a fashion, then the same police measures--or worse--can be meted out to anyone.



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