Arrests follow pro-Anwar demonstration in Kuala Lumpur

John Roberts
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The Malaysian government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has reacted to a 10,000-strong political rally in support of jailed former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim by arresting leading opposition figures.

The September 19 protest rally in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital, marked one year since Anwar's arrest on corruption and sodomy charges. The demonstrators gathered at the National Mosque. It was from there that Anwar, just prior to his arrest, had led 30,000 protesters in denouncing Mahathir's rule.

The rally demanded an independent inquiry into allegations that Anwar is being poisoned in prison. Anwar is currently undergoing tests ordered by the judge conducting his trial on sodomy charges. Anwar's lawyers told the court that a pathologist's report from Australia said Anwar's urine samples showed levels of arsenic 77 times the normal level.

The government has denied any mistreatment of Anwar. Mahathir has suggested that Anwar's family added the arsenic to his urine samples as a stunt in preparation for national elections, due by next June.

When the demonstrators attempted to move from the National Mosque to the National Palace to present a petition to the King calling for Anwar to be released from prison to home detention, police moved in. After ordering the rally to disperse, they opened up with tear gas and chemical-laced water cannon. Both police and demonstrators were reportedly injured.

The arrests began almost immediately. The next day, police attempted to arrest two National Justice party officials—vice-president Tian Chua and youth leader Momamed Ezam Mohamed—at a 12,000-strong political rally. Police backed down when told that the arrests would lead to chaos.

The two were taken into custody when they presented themselves for questioning at police headquarters. Press reports quoted Tian as saying during his arrest that: "The government can arrest us but more leaders will rise up. The threats made by Mahathir cannot oppress the people any more."

By the following Sunday, 14 people had been detained under laws banning unlawful assemblies. Police were seeking 42 others, said to be leaders of the September 19 rally. Malaysian newspapers have published photos of suspects with calls for the public to inform police of their whereabouts.

Those arrested so far face fines of up to $M10,000 and one year in jail. Among them were Mohamed Azmin Ali, a senior official of the National Justice Party, the party founded by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. Others include Hatta Ramli, a central committee member of the Parti Islam SeMalaysia; Sivarasa Rasiah, a leading human rights lawyer and legal advisor to the Malaysian Peoples Party; and Hishamuddin Rais, a former student activist and filmmaker.

Such has been the extent of the crackdown that Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has publicly denied opposition claims that it was a repeat of 1987's “Operation Lalang”. At that time 106 of the government's political opponents were detained under the Internal Security Act.

As the government was widening the wave of arrests, opposition leaders issued a statement endorsing the jailed Anwar as their preferred choice as Malaysia's next prime minister.

The statement was signed by Parti Islam SeMalaysia president Fadzil Noor; Lim Kit Siang, leader of the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party; Syed Husin Ali, president of the Malaysian People's Party; and

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Chandra Muzaffar, deputy president of the National Justice Party.

The events since September 19 indicate that political tensions are rising, causing serious problems for Mahathir's coalition government in the run up to next year's scheduled election.

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