

# Five Malaysian opposition figures arrested in government crackdown

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In what may foreshadow broader political repression, the Malaysian government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has since Wednesday rounded up and charged five prominent opposition figures under the country's Sedition Act and the Official Secrets Act. The arrests come just a month and a half after national elections, in which opposition parties were able to use widespread anti-government disaffection, particularly over last year's jailing of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, to make significant electoral inroads.

Mahathir, who has departed for a holiday, has left his new deputy Abdullah Badawi, who is also the Home Minister, in charge of overseeing the arrests. Abdullah has denied that the government is planning a wider crackdown but has not ruled out further arrests, saying blandly: "If more people commit offences, there will be more arrests."

Like many of Malaysia's anti-democratic laws, the charge of sedition is very broad in its scope, making it a crime to incite hatred against the king, sultans, government or the administration of justice, threaten racial unity or question the privileged position of Malays. Sedition charges carry a penalty of up to three years in jail and/or a fine of \$M5,000, and charges under the Official Secrets Act, a maximum of seven years in jail and/or a fine of \$M5,000.

Those arrested, charged and bailed were:

\* Karpal Singh, Democratic Action Party (DAP) deputy chairman, charged with sedition over remarks he made last year as Anwar's defence lawyer alleging a high-level conspiracy to poison Anwar. He has pointed out that his arrest was the first time in any country of the British Commonwealth that charges had been laid against a lawyer for remarks made during a court case.

\* Marina Yusoff, Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party) vice-president and also a lawyer, charged

with sedition for alleging in a speech that politicians from the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) instigated the race riots on May 13, 1969. Marina is a former senior UMNO politician who joined Keadilan, an opposition party formed last year by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Ismail.

\* Mohamed Ezam Mohd Noor, Keadilan youth leader, charged under the Official Secrets Act for holding classified government documents. During the election campaign, the government threatened to take legal action against the media if the documents, which support allegations of corruption against International Trade Minister Rafidah Aziz and UMNO politician Rahim Tamby Chik, were published.

\* Zulkifli Sulong, *Harakah* editor, charged with publishing a seditious article reporting a statement by Keadilan deputy president Chandra Muzaffar alleging judicial and police complicity in a government plot against Anwar. The *Harakah* newspaper is the organ of the Islamic fundamentalists of Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). Under conditions in which the majority of the Malaysian media are uncritical mouthpieces for government policy, *Harakah's* circulation has mushroomed over the last 18 months from 75,000 to 360,000—70,000 ahead of its nearest mainstream rival.

\* Chia Lim Thye, the printer of *Harakah*, charged with sedition over the same article. If Zulkifli and Chia are found guilty, the government could move to shut down the newspaper. The police have already issued reports against *Harakah* and also the *Utusan Malaysia* newspaper.

The arrests are certain to fuel anti-government sentiment and protests. Most of the charges relate to the trial of Anwar Ibrahim in which he accused Mahathir and senior ministers of engaging in a conspiracy to get rid of him by concocting the charges of corruption and

sexual misconduct. The overly political nature of the charges against the five will simply confirm for many that Anwar's allegations were correct.

Marina confirmed in her comments that the arrests have already provoked a strong reaction among students and young people who predominated in the anti-government protests and rallies over the last year and a half. Warning that there would be more arrests, she said: "[T]he feeling on the ground is one of anger. Youths especially are very angry. I do not rule out the possibility of them taking to the streets."

The government also faces opposition from lawyers who are disturbed at the precedent being set by the arrest of Karpal Singh for his remarks as Anwar's defence lawyer. Malaysian Bar Council chairman R. Chelvarajah said on Friday a petition asking for an Extraordinary General Meeting had already been received from 53 lawyers.

"We have to make a stand on the sedition charge against a lawyer for words uttered in court. The case marks the first time a lawyer faces criminal charges in the course of defending his client," Chelvarajah said. "Karpal's case will have far-reaching implications on the legal profession itself."

The arrests could galvanise the opposition parties. DAP, PAS, Keadilan and the smaller Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian Peoples Party) fought the election as an alliance but are deeply divided by racial and religious politics. The Democratic Action Party, based largely among ethnic Chinese, is hostile to the plans of PAS to establish an Islamic state and Islamic law in the two northern states—Kelantan and neighbouring Terengganu—that it controls following the November 29 election.

Even from its own standpoint, the government's actions appear to be a particularly hamfisted means of dealing with its opposition. The ruling UMNO-led coalition, which has been in power since independence in 1957, has a substantial parliamentary majority; controls much of the media; can count on the courts and police; and has direct connections to powerful sections of big business. Yet the government stirs up a political hornet's nest by arresting its opponents.

The decision to charge the five is another indication that Mahathir and UMNO, far from being in a position of strength, have been considerably weakened by the events of the last 18 months. The sacking, expulsion

and subsequent arrest of Anwar in September 1998 split UMNO and revealed deep divisions within the ruling class itself over the direction of economic policy. Just days before Anwar's sacking, Mahathir dismissed the head of the central bank and introduced a raft of currency and capital controls that cut directly across the policies being implemented by Anwar at the behest of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The national election last November gave a rather distorted glimpse of the depth of public alienation with the government's handling of the Anwar trial and more broadly over the lack of basic democratic rights and the gulf between rich and poor. The ruling Barisan Nasional retained its two-thirds parliamentary majority but failed in its attempt to win back the state of Kelantan from PAS and lost Terengganu. Despite an electoral gerrymander, the opposition managed to more than double its parliamentary seats from 22 to 45.

UMNO, not its coalition partners, bore the brunt of the electoral losses, generating further dissatisfaction within the party's ranks. A directive from UMNO's supreme council on January 3 "advised" party members that the leadership ballot due to take place in May should allow Mahathir and his deputy Abdullah to be nominated unopposed. While no one is challenging the two directly, the call for a no-contest leadership ballot has met with internal opposition.

The latest arrests are no doubt meant as a warning not only to the opposition but also to Mahathir's inner-party opponents that the government will not tolerate criticism of its policies and actions.



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