

Malaysian government puts "Islamic" arms raiders on trial for treason

John Roberts

26 September 2000

The trial began in Kuala Lumpur on September 11 of 29 men accused of raiding two Malaysian army weapons stores on July 2 and murdering two hostages. Two of the accused are also charged with using weapons stolen in the raid to attack a brewery. The case is a highly sensitive one for the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and the prosecution team is being led Attorney-General Tan Sri Mohtar Abdullah.

The men have been formally charged with waging or attempting to wage war against the Malaysian king, the legal term for treason, a crime that carries the death penalty or life imprisonment. The accused have all pleaded not guilty before High Court judge Zulkefly Ahmand Makinudin and are represented by 31 lawyers.

The government has laid the charges under rarely used 1975 Essential (Security Cases) Regulations (Escar), which severely limit the ability of the accused to mount a defence. The prosecution is allowed to admit hearsay evidence and can protect the identity of its witnesses by having them give evidence while hooded. Not only can the public gallery be closed and the proceedings held in camera, but testimony may be given without defence lawyers being present.

The attorney-general only charged the group on August 8 after he previously deferred the laying of formal charges "in the interest of national security". The accused men had been held under the country's draconian Internal Security Act, which provides for indefinite detention without trial.

Defence lawyer Karpal Singh pointed out that the 1975 law was last used in 1983 in a murder case involving a former minister Mokhtar Hashim. In 1978 the Privy Council in Britain had declared the law unconstitutional but the Malaysian parliament later reinstated it.

The facts of the case, even as presented by the government and the tightly-controlled Malaysian media, raise many questions.

The men are alleged to be members of a Muslim sect called Al-Ma'unah. Dressed in army uniforms, they approached two isolated Malaysian army camps in the northwestern state of Perak in the early hours of July 2. Three of the men wore the uniforms of officers with insignia of a lieutenant colonel, a major and a captain.

According to the government's account the men claimed they were carrying out a weapons inspection. They succeeded in loading three four-wheel drives full of weapons. They captured and later shot two hostages—a soldier and a police officer—during the police and military operations that led to the surrender of 27 of the group.

Their leader is alleged to be Mohd Amin Mohd Razali, a former army captain. One soldier testified that the bearing and behaviour of the men convinced the soldiers on duty that those involved in the raid were "superior officers". The witness appeared not to have reacted to the fact that the camp was being "inspected" at 2:50am and that, unlike any other previous inspection, weapons were taken away.

The indictment states that this shadowy group "carefully planned to stage a strike against the establishment". Prior to July 2, the Al-Ma'unah sect was virtually unknown. It claimed on a now closed web site to have 1,000 members and to have sought enlightenment through martial arts. The site proclaimed, "Jihad (holy war) is our way," but explained little about the group's political program and nothing of its history. Why a group of ex-army men would be involved in or form such a group has been left unexplained.

Perhaps the most significant political outcome of the

raid is the widespread disbelief in the government's version of events. From the outset, Mahathir has had to try to counter rumours that the government and the army orchestrated the raid in order to discredit their opponents—in particular, the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS).

The distrust is a product of the government's sustained crackdown on the opposition. For two years Mahathir has used the courts to persecute former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. The two trials used to jail Anwar are widely perceived as blatant political frame-ups, damaging the credibility of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) among its Malay electoral base.

The anti-government feeling has been exploited by the Islamic fundamentalist PAS, which made substantial gains at UMNO's expense in the national elections held late last year. The government responded by stepping up the harassment of its opponents—the circulation of PAS's newspaper *Harakah* has been curtailed and legal action taken against its editor.

If the government did organise the raids on the army bases, which is by no means impossible, then the exercise has backfired. Mahathir and his ministers have been forced into some extraordinary political contortions in a bid to convince the public that they were not involved. It is no doubt one of the reasons why the case is being held under the Essential (Security Cases) Regulations. Any embarrassing facts can be suppressed—“in the interests of national security”.

On July 20, Mahathir took part in a one-hour TV interview to defend the official version of what had taken place and accused those raising doubts about the case of trying to evoke sympathy for the criminals. “We have now seen that to protect those directly or indirectly involved or those sympathising with the group, they hurl accusations that the government planned the heist,” he said.

Mahathir denied that the government had set up the raid to provide the pretext for further measures against its political opponents or to force PAS in particular to remove “Islam” from its party name. “There's no need for that at all,” he said. “We don't have to resort to killing to seek justification for that (disallowing the term Islam in party names).”

But these remarks did not dispel the widespread disbelief. On August 16, Defence Minister Najib Razak

took the strange step of reenacting the raid to “prove” that the events could have taken place as the government claimed. After the re-enactment the minister impressed upon the assembled journalists that he had now demonstrated that there was enough space in three Pajero four-wheel drives for 100 assault rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers, thousands of rounds of ammunition and more than 15 men.

Whatever the actual truth of the matter, the defensive handling of the issue is another sign of the government's unpopularity and of discord within its ranks. Within the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, the conservative Malaysian Chinese Association has begun to tentatively challenge UMNO's policy of special privileges for Malays. Outside the government PAS leaders, are continuing to stir up anti-Mahathir and anti-UMNO feeling over the treatment of Anwar.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)