Mahathir reacts to growing criticism

Nine opposition leaders in Malaysia arrested in government crackdown

John Roberts
30 April 2001

Malaysian police last week detained another opposition leader under the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), bringing to nine the number of oppositionists now being held. Lokman Noor Adam, a Keadilan (National Justice Party) youth leader, was arrested just after midnight on April 24 after attending a rally in Shan Alam city, just outside the capital Kuala Lumpur.

His arrest follows the detention of seven opposition leaders on April 10, just prior to an opposition rally on April 14 to mark the second anniversary of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's conviction on trumped-up corruption charges. Six of the seven arrested were members of Keadilan, which was formed by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, and were involved in organising the rally.

Those detained included Keadilan's vice-president Tian Chua, its youth leader Ezam Mohamad Noor, one of its council members Saari Sungib, its youth secretary N. Gobalakrishnan and the head of the Free Anwar movement, Raja Petra Kamarudin. On April 20, police seized Badrul Amin Baharom, a member of Keadilan's supreme council.

At a press conference on April 11, the Malaysian police chief claimed that the seven arrested were among 20 people who “were planning militant actions to topple the government” and alleged that they were trying to obtain firearms and explosives. But he presented no evidence and none is required under the ISA, which provides for detention without trial, initially for two years, for anyone deemed to be acting “in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia”. For the first 60 days, detainees can be denied access to lawyers.

Displaying his usual contempt for democratic rights, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad justified the use of the ISA, saying: “They could have been arrested under normal laws but normal laws require certain evidence and procedures and processes which is, I suppose, from the police point of view not effective in preventing something from happening.” He said political opposition would be tolerated but only if it followed “normal democratic procedures” which did not include protests and rallies.

Keadilan and its coalition partners—the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malaysian Peoples Party—condemned the arrest as outright political repression. Local and international human rights groups along with the Malaysian Trade Union Congress, which usually does not protest the government's actions, called for the oppositionists' release.

Keadilan deputy president Chandra Muzaffar described the charges as “farcical”. He said the arrests were designed to stamp out “the growing anti-Mahathir sentiment... It is a preemptive move in view of the imminent economic downturn because the Mahathir government is afraid that if the economy declines, the people's anger will mount and any attempts to mobilise people in such circumstances will be successful.”

Despite the arrests and further threats by police, more than 2,000 people gathered outside the National Human Rights Commission on April 14 to protest Anwar's continued detention. The rally broke up peacefully after a delegation led by Anwar's wife presented a memorandum on human rights abuses in Malaysia. Anwar is serving a 15-year jail term after being found guilty of abuse of power and sodomy.

The following day, the government continued its political attack on the opposition. Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar claimed that the rally's organisers had sought assistance from activists in Indonesia. Mahathir repeated the allegation, without any evidence, that

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"certain parties" had sought Indonesian help. The accusation is designed not only to provide a thin pretext for further political repression on national security grounds but to appeal to Malay nationalists.

On April 18, High Court judge Augustine Paul rejected an application for the release of the detained opposition leaders. The defence lawyers had demanded that the government provide evidence for its claims that those arrested had sought firearms and explosives to help topple the government. But the judge simply accepted a police assertion that the oppositions were being held under the ISA "for other reasons... which would not be disclosed". Paul was the judge who found Anwar guilty in his first trial.

The scant regard for democratic rights displayed by the government in arresting opposition leaders is not unusual in Malaysian politics. But the latest crackdown comes amid growing signs of divisions within Mahathir's United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the leading party of the ruling coalition.

On the same day as the first arrests, UMNO Supreme Council member Shahrir Samad publicly challenged Mahathir in an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). "He becomes a liability and will remain a liability if he does not attempt to change and make the changes which are necessary within the Malaysian context," he said.

On the same program the head of the UMNO youth wing, L. Alwi, expressed doubts about Mahathir's leadership, saying: "We could be in jeopardy if we fail to adapt and adjust to the changes that have occurred." The ABC report also featured a Malaysian political analyst, E. Pillai, who predicted Mahathir would be gone in a year, "very likely much earlier than that".

Such open criticism of Mahathir within UNMO indicates deep division within its ranks. The original rift between Anwar and Mahathir opened up in 1998 over economic policy differences following the eruption of the Asian financial crisis.

As finance minister, Anwar supported the IMF's demands for economic restructuring and deregulation, which threatened the privileged position of commercial empires with UMNO connections. Mahathir removed the head of the central bank and imposed capital and currency controls to shore up faltering businesses, then sacked Anwar and expelled him and his supporters. When Anwar began publicly campaigning against Mahathir, he was detained—initially under the ISA—then put on trial on bogus charges of corruption and sexual misconduct.

The measures against Anwar and his supporters have, however, failed to halt criticism within UMNO, indicating that the differences over economic issues, inside the party and more generally within ruling circles, have sharpened. In February, a rally organised with Mahathir's blessing by an UMNO grouping known as the Malay Action Front became an arena for criticisms of the government's bail-out of corporations and UMNO's dwindling support among ethnic Malays.

Another sign of political tensions in the government has been the announced departure—said to be temporary—of finance minister Daim Zainuddin—one of Mahathir's closest political associates and the figure most closely identified with UMNO's business connections. A wealthy businessman himself, Zainuddin was brought back into the government in 1998 to replace Anwar.

Behind the nervousness in UMNO are concerns about the Malaysia's economic prospects in the event of a protracted downturn in the US and elsewhere. The country was able to survive the impact of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis not as a result of the government's capital and currency controls, but largely because of strong exports, particularly of electronic products to the US.

On March 27, Mahathir announced a series of fiscal and monetary measures totalling $US790 million to try to stimulate domestic consumption. The following day the country's central bank, Bank Negara, revised this year's estimated economic growth from 7 percent to between 5 and 6 percent.

Despite the government's capital controls, an estimated $US18 billion in investment capital has left Malaysia in the past two years. According to a *Washington Post* report in March, a survey of 60 countries showed that only two were predicted to be less attractive to investors during the next five years as compared to the past five—Malaysia and Chinese-controlled Hong Kong.

Taken together with the dissension in UMNO's ranks, the latest police crackdown on oppositionists bears all the hallmarks of a desperate action taken by a political leader who is increasingly under siege from within and without.

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