

Mahathir detains Malaysian student leaders

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Malaysian police have increased to 12 the number of people arrested under the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) since a crackdown on political oppositionists and government critics began on April 10. The ISA enables the government to detain anyone deemed to be a threat to national security indefinitely without trial, subject only to a review every two years.

For the first time since the 1970s, two university students were arrested under the ISA on July 5 and 7. University of Malaya Students Representative Council president Mohamad Fuad Mohamed Ikhwan, a 22-year-old business studies student, was released on July 18. But the other student leader, 24-year-old Khairul Annuar Ahmad Zainuddin from the Mara Vocational Institute, remains in custody.

The two detentions are part of a broader campaign by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to intimidate government opponents on campuses and elsewhere. Since Mahathir ousted his deputy Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 and then jailed him on trumped up charges, students have been prominent in the protests against the government's heavy-handed methods. Just prior to the latest arrests, Mahathir pointedly denounced students for taking part in demonstrations and insisted they stick to their studies.

On July 17, the prime minister foreshadowed a regulation that will force students to sign contracts allowing for their expulsion if their performance is not satisfactory. Mahathir told an audience at the Malacca Manipal Medical College that if students "do not fully utilise the opportunities and money spent on them, it is necessary for the government to kick them out of university".

Mahathir's threats are not idle. At least one student who was arrested at a June 8 student rally against the ISA, Rapzan Ramli, was expelled after being released from custody. Mahathir has also warned tertiary teaching staff, saying: "If they are more interested in

activities other than teaching, they are welcome to leave."

The way in which the courts have handled the latest round of ISA detentions is a further indication of divisions in ruling circles over Mahathir's leadership.

Five of the oppositionists arrested in April have launched an appeal in the country's highest court, the Federal Court, against their continued detention. Chua Tian Chang (Tian Chua), Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor, Saari Sungip—all leaders of the opposition party Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party), formed by Anwar Ibrahim's wife Wan Azizah—and activist Hishamuddin Rais, are being held without charge under two-year detention order. The fifth appellant Raja Petra has been released.

Normally such appeals would be a forgone conclusion in the government's favour. But on June 6, Chief Justice Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah rejected an application by the senior deputy public prosecutor to have the appeal of the five detainees discontinued. Instead he appointed an additional two judges to hear the case on August 6.

The decision followed a previous High Court ruling in May ordering the release of two ISA detainees. Judge Hishamudin Mohd Yunus not only dismissed police claims that the two represented a threat to national security but also sent a message to the government about its use of the ISA against political opponents. "Those police officers responsible for the detention of the applicants must wake up to the fact the supreme law of this country is the constitution and not the ISA," he said.

On June 27, the Federal Court threw out a contempt of court conviction and prison sentence against one of Anwar Ibrahim's defence lawyers, Zainur Zakaria. Acting on Anwar's behalf, Zainur had introduced an affidavit in the 1998 trial accusing the prosecution of attempting to pressure a witness into making false

statements against Anwar. The presiding judge cited Zainur for contempt—a decision that was upheld by the Court of Appeal. In throwing out the charge, the Federal Court judges simply made the point that the defence lawyer had been acting in his client's interest.

In many countries these court decisions would not be considered earth shattering. But in Malaysia, where the courts have been carefully appointed, groomed, and when necessary disciplined by successive United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led governments, the challenge to Mahathir's authority is unmistakable. Taken together with rather muted criticisms of Mahathir inside UMNO and the continuing protests by opposition parties and groups, it indicates that the deep-seated rifts in the ruling elites opened up by the sacking of Anwar have not been resolved.

At the heart of the conflict between Anwar and Mahathir were deep disagreements over economic policy. As finance minister in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Anwar was implementing the economic restructuring remedies demanded by the IMF. He ran up against opposition from Mahathir precisely because the IMF measures were threatening a layer of businesses with close connections to UMNO. Mahathir overturned Anwar's policies, imposed capital and currency controls and then sacked Anwar when he refused to resign.

The underlying cause for the hardening opposition to Mahathir in ruling circles lies in the slide in the country's economic prospects. For the last three years, Mahathir has paraded as the economic saviour of Malaysia, insisting that his decisions in 1998 enabled the economy to recover. In fact, like other East Asian economies, the Malaysian recovery was largely the result of increased exports, particularly to the US.

Now, however, with the major economies including the US slowing, Malaysia is feeling the pinch, along with the rest of Asia. Malaysian exports fell by 7 percent in May compared with the same month last year. In the first five months of this year 12,952 jobs were lost, 2,000 a month coming from the electronics industry. The Malaysian Trade Union Congress predicts that half the electronic industry workforce—100,000—will be laid off by the end of the year.

Under these conditions, Mahathir's claim to be an

economic miracle worker does not appear particularly convincing. He recently celebrated his 20th anniversary in office on July 16. How much longer he will last is by no means certain. But all the signs point to the fact that the opposition to Mahathir is continuing and if anything sharpening, and that his days are numbered.



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