

Islamic party in Malaysia targetted in latest government crackdown

John Roberts
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The Malaysian government has extended its crackdown on political opposition by arbitrarily arresting 10 more people under the country's repressive Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial. The latest police roundup included at least six members of one of the main opposition parties—the Islamic-based Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), a coalition partner in the Alternative Front group.

Among those arrested on August 2-3 was 34-year-old Nik Adli Nik Abdul Aziz. A religious teacher, he is the son of Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, a PAS religious leader and chief minister of the state government of Kelantan, one of the two states where the party holds power. Others detained include Noorashid Sakip, a PAS youth leader, and PAS member Tajuddin Abu Bakar.

The government has accused those detained of having been trained in Afghanistan to carry out terrorist activities in Malaysia. It claims they are linked to a shadowy movement known as Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), which first came to public notice in May after a bank robbery in which one of the group was killed and eight captured.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was quick to use the arrests to attack PAS. Speaking on August 4, he claimed, without offering any evidence: “These people have gone abroad, getting involved with the Taliban and accumulating weapons overseas, and now they have returned...We believe there was PAS influence among the members [of KMM]. There are party members who are extreme and feel that the democratic process is too slow or did not help them. They are happier using violence to topple the government.”

At the last elections in late 1999, however, it was Mahathir's own United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the major component of the ruling coalition,

which suffered a setback. The rightwing PAS was able to make inroads into UMNO's traditional base among ethnic Malays by exploiting the opposition to Mahathir's dismissal, persecution and jailing of his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim.

Both Mahathir and Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi deny that the latest arrests are politically motivated. Badawi, who is also the Home Minister, claimed that PAS was not being targeted. “The police definitely know what has happened and if by coincidence the individuals arrested are PAS members we can't help it.” But the latest arrests, like the previous ISA detentions of political leaders and student activists, are clearly aimed at stamping out anti-government protests and opposition.

The August 2-3 roundup of PAS members follows a police campaign to put an end to political-religious meetings being held across the country by PAS. Known as *ceramahs*, up to a dozen were being held each night. PAS refused to cancel the meetings, even though at least 16 people have been arrested for attending under a law that bans public gatherings of more than five people without police permission. So desperate is Mahathir to stifle any oppositional activity that the government has banned the circulation of video compact discs (VCDs) of the *ceramahs* and police have raided shops to seize copies.

PAS secretary-general Nasharuddin Mat Isa told the press on August 4 that the aim of the ISA arrests was to crackdown on the *ceramahs* and to discredit the party. Democratic Action Party chairmen Lim Kit Siang said: “If the government has evidence... they [the detainees] should be charged in court and put through an open trial and not be detained under the ISA.”

So far, the only evidence linking any of those arrested to Afghanistan has come from Kelantan Chief Minister

Nik Abdul, who admitted that his son visited the country while studying in Pakistan. But as he pointed out, the visit was during the period of Soviet occupation. “He sent me a letter saying he was going to Afghanistan. But then it was the normal thing to do at the time... Even the United States was then supplying arms to the Mujahideen to oppose Russia. So, what is all the fuss about?”

In April, the government detained 10 opposition leaders, most of whom were members or supporters of the Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party) formed by Wan Azizah, the wife of Anwar Ibrahim. They also were accused, without any evidence, of obtaining explosives and weapons to topple the government. Five of them are currently appealing their arrests in the country’s highest court—the Federal Court.

In July, two student leaders, who had been involved in anti-ISA protests, were detained. Mahathir has long accused universities and schools of being sources of anti-government ideas. On August 8, a schoolteacher in the northern state of Terengganu was arrested and charged with sedition. Shamsukamal Abu Bakar’s crime was to set an exam question on the country’s justice system. If convicted he faces three years in jail and a hefty fine.

Far from being a sign of strength, the use of such crude methods points to a government under siege. After 20 years in power, Mahathir faces growing opposition in ruling circles, including within UMNO. The divisions over economic policy that provoked the breakup with Anwar have not gone away and, in fact, have intensified as the economy slides towards recession. The electronics industry has been hit by the worldwide slump in demand for hi-tech products and the latest industrial production figures for June show a decline of 9.9 percent compared to a year before.

One indication of the rifts in the ruling elite is a hint of independence being shown by the judiciary. Throughout Mahathir’s rule, the judges have rubberstamped virtually all of the repressive measures carried out by the government and the police. But in the current round of ISA arrests, the courts have offered some support to the detainees.

On May 30, a High Court judge ordered the release of two of those detained in the April roundup and made some pointed criticisms of the government’s use of the

ISA.

Currently five of those arrested in April are appealing against a ruling by High Court judge Augustine Paul on April 25 that the courts had no power to hear Habeas Corpus applications by persons arrested under the ISA. Paul presided over one of the two trials that sent Anwar Ibrahim to jail for 15 years.

On June 6, Malaysia’s Chief Justice Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah rejected an application by the senior deputy public prosecutor to have the appeal discontinued. Instead, he underscored the importance of the case by appointing extra judges to constitute a five-judge Federal Court panel to hear the appeal.

The government received a further setback on August 6, when the five-judge panel unanimously ruled that the lawyers for the ISA appellants could present 12 affidavits related to their interrogation by police and their treatment in detention.

Lawyer Sulaiman Abdullah told the Federal Court that the new evidence would prove the “total misuse of the security apparatus” for political purposes. He said the police interrogation did not involve questions about the alleged offences but focused on the prisoners’ sex lives, combined with appeals to the accused to abandon their support for Anwar and join the ruling parties.

The affidavit of Hishamuddin Rais quoted one police interrogator as saying, “If Parti Islam se-Malaysia or the Alternative Front wins, we’ll all take to the streets with weapons. We are trained and we have the experience.”

The government lawyers tried to have the affidavits ruled inadmissible, as they did not refer to events after the initial April 25 court ruling. However, the court ruled that the evidence was not available at the time and could be used now to show bad faith by the police in carrying out the arrests under the ISA.

Within the context of Malaysian politics, the willingness of the courts to challenge the government, even tentatively, and risk reprisal is a symptom of deep-seated resentment and opposition to Mahathir in ruling circles.



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