

Signs of a growing antiwar movement in Malaysia

John Roberts
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After two weeks of hostilities in Iraq, antiwar protests in Malaysia are growing in size, creating concerns in ruling circles about the potential for political instability.

Two of the largest demonstrations took place last Saturday in the capital Kuala Lumpur. The first was a rally held by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition as a means of maintaining its control over the antiwar movement. The second, which was organised by opposition parties, was attacked by police.

More than 10,000 people gathered at the “legal” BN demonstration near the centre of the city to express opposition to the war. The gathering was dominated by the parties and organisations associated with the ruling coalition, including ethnic Chinese and Indian groups. Two government ministers were present. Speakers included teachers and students from the city’s Iraqi school, who described the horrors of war being endured inside Iraq.

At the same time, police waded into 2,000 opposition party demonstrators as they placed coffins marked “Freedom”, “Democracy” and “Liberty” in front of the Australian High Commission. The rally was organised by the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), Parti Keadilan Nasional, Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) and the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party.

The protestors originally attempted to march on the US Embassy but heavily-armed police blocked their way. When they arrived at the Australian High Commission, police ordered them to disperse. After demonstrators sat down, police fired tear gas into the crowd. Twelve were arrested, including PRM president Dr Syed Husin Ali and two members of the party’s youth wing.

The rallies followed earlier small demonstrations in the capital. On March 21, an antiwar protest of 7,000

took place in the northeastern state of Kelantan, where PAS controls the state government. Demonstrators burnt effigies of Bush and Blair and chanted “Destroy Bush” and “Long Live Islam”. Party leader and Kelantan chief minister Nik Aziz Nik Mat urged the crowd to boycott American goods.

The opposition party demonstrations are the largest since protests erupted over the jailing of Anwar Ibrahim in 1999. Anwar, who served as Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s deputy, was sacked and expelled from the ruling United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) after sharp differences emerged over economic policy. He was arrested and tried on trumped-up charges when he began organising anti-government rallies.

After opposition parties made significant gains in the 1999 national elections, Mahathir used the full battery of the Malaysia’s anti-democratic laws to crack down on the pro-Anwar protests. A number of senior opposition figures were arrested in 2000 and 2001, some under the draconian Internal Security Act which provides for indefinite detention without trial.

The police response to the antiwar rally last weekend indicates government fears that the opposition will gain support as the US-led war on Iraq drags on. Despite his, at times, strident statements against the Iraq war, Mahathir is careful not to damage his relations with Washington. Malaysia is highly dependent on exports into the North American market and on US investment. Behind the scenes, the government has been cooperating closely with the Bush administration’s “global war on terror”.

Mahathir candidly admitted in a recent interview in the regional newspaper, the *Daily Express*, that the government is nervous about alienating the Bush administration. “The US is a powerful nation, which a

small nation is afraid of... They're capable of arm twisting in many ways, not only through invasion... They can apply sanctions... We're a weak nation, we can't fight a war, we can't even defend ourselves in case of economic attacks against us, so naturally we're afraid."

The longer the war on Iraq proceeds, the deeper the opposition will become. The government is clearly concerned that its carefully stage-managed antiwar rallies will be sidelined. There are already indications that Mahathir, a past master at cynical political manipulation, is prepared to use the carrot as well as the stick with opposition parties.

On March 25, Hishammuddin Hussein, a youth leader from Mahathir's UMNO, joined his PAS counterpart, Mhafuz Omar, in leading a joint government-opposition delegation to hand a written protest note to US Ambassador Marie Huhtala. The youth wings of UMNO and PAS are normally at one another's throats.

The opposition parties have indicated their willingness to work with the government. PAS acting president Abdul Hadi Awang declared recently: "PAS will work with the government, political parties and organisations in the country to resolve the negative effects of the war." In similar vein, DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang urged parliament to put aside all other business to pass a unanimous all-party condemnation of the war.

All the established political parties are anxious to keep the growing popular sentiment against the war from spilling outside the framework of official politics.



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