

# Malaysian government detains opponents without trial for another two years

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In a politically-motivated manoeuvre, Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi last week extended the detention of nine political activists for another two years. They have been held without trial or charge since August 2001 under the country's notorious Internal Security Act (ISA) on suspicion of terrorism.

The nine, all members of the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), are among more than 90 prisoners detained since 2001 on suspicion of belonging to terrorist groups. Badawi, who is also Home Minister, claimed their continued detention was necessary because they posed a threat to national security. They were, he said, members of the Islamic militia group Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), which was linked to Jemaah Islamiah (JI), the group blamed for the Bali bombings last October.

One of the detainees is Nik Adli Nik Abdul Aziz, the son of Nik Aziz Nik Mat, a PAS leader and chief minister of the state of Kelantan. PAS is the ruling party in two of Malaysia's northern states—Kelantan and Terengganu. Among the others detained are PAS youth wing leader Noorashid Sakip and PAS youth committee member Mohd Lothfi Ariffin.

Malaysian police accuse the men of being involved in a series of robberies and the killing of a politician. While it is possible that some or all of the nine may be guilty, none of the evidence against them has been made public or tested in court. Under the ISA, detainees can be held indefinitely on vague grounds of national security, subject only to the home minister's renewal of the detention order every two years. Detainees have limited access to lawyers and virtually no ability to legally challenge their imprisonment via the courts.

As a result, it is just as likely that the men are

political prisoners whose continued detention is aimed at casting the slur of "terrorism" against PAS. There is also evidence that they are being brutally treated. A report by the US-based Human Rights Watch published on September 20 noted: "There are allegations of abuses against some of the detainees, including ill treatment while in custody and coercion during questioning."

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's government is notorious for using the ISA and other laws to deal with political opponents—the most high profile case being the jailing of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on trumped-up charges of sexual misconduct and corruption.

PAS is not the only opposition party to be targeted. Ten leading figures and members of the National Justice Party (Keadilan), formed by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, were rounded up prior to and during an opposition rally in April 2001, called to oppose the continued jailing of Anwar. Among those detained under the ISA were Keadilan Vice President Tian Chua, the party's youth leader Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor and Keadilan council member Saari Sungip.

Prior to the September 11 attacks and the Bush administration's "war on terrorism," Mahathir had to weather international objections of his anti-democratic methods. Since then, not only has any criticism ended but Washington has praised the authoritarian regime for its "fight against terror". In fact, the ISA, comparatively speaking, is a model of due legal process compared to the US detention of hundreds of "terrorist suspects" at the Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba—who are being illegally held without any access to lawyers or court procedure.

Badawi's decision to renew the detention of the nine PAS members is more likely to be connected to the

political situation confronting the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) than to any threat they allegedly pose to national security. Next month, after 22 years in office, Mahathir is due to hand over the reins of power to his deputy Badawi. Moreover, UMNO and its allies in the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government face a general election, which is due by November next year but is expected sooner.

The change of leadership comes at a sensitive time for the Malay ruling elite in UMNO. The government has been involved in a delicate political balancing act: between popular disgust at Washington's militarist policies, including the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and low-key cooperation with the US "war on terrorism" as a means for gaining the Bush administration's economic and political support.

At this stage, UMNO's greatest electoral threat comes from PAS. At the last general elections in November 1999, UMNO lost support in its Malay Muslim constituency, largely to PAS. As a result it was forced to rely on its coalition partners, including the Malaysian Chinese Association, to retain the two-thirds parliamentary majority that the BN needs to change the country's constitution.

In order to regain lost political ground, Mahathir attempted to link PAS and Keadilan to terrorism. The arrests in April and August 2001 were part of this tactic, which was then stepped up after September 11. The political manoeuvre proved effective for a while, with UMNO making gains in regional elections and by-elections. But UMNO's ability to be able to play the terrorist card has been undermined by growing popular opposition to the Bush administration and its brutal subjugation of Iraq.

PAS has capitalised on this anti-US sentiment in an effort to bolster support for its own reactionary communal agenda—the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia. The party is targeting two more states in the economically-backward north—Kedah and Pahang—in the next elections. Where it holds power in Kelantan and Terengganu, the party has begun implementing its moral code: the segregation of men and women in supermarkets and a ban on alcohol and dancing.

At UMNO's 50th anniversary rally on September 20-21, Mahathir attempted to rally the party for the coming election, attacking the opposition and directing

most of his remarks against PAS and its demand for an Islamic state. At the UN General Assembly last week, this privileged representative of the Malay ruling elites used his last speech to posture, once again, as the defender of the masses. The West and the UN had failed "to protect the weak and poor," he said. The world faces "the resurgence of European imperialism... puppet states are installed, dancing as puppets do," he added.

While true, his comments are part of a tired and completely cynical routine. It is the complement to political repression and economic policies that have benefitted a narrow layer of the Malay ruling elite and middle classes. Whether it is enough to enable his successor Badawi, a colourless yes-man, to win the next elections in a politically volatile climate remains to be seen.



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