

Malaysia: Large protest in Kuala Lumpur demands electoral reforms

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In the largest demonstration in Malaysia for nearly a decade, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur on Saturday to demand reforms to the country's electoral system. The protest was organised by Bersih (Clean), a coalition of opposition political parties and 26 non-government organisations.

The government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi denounced the protest, which was banned by police using a colonial-era law requiring permits for gatherings of more than five people. National police chief Musa Hassan warned last week that the police would take "tough action" if the rally proceeded—a warning repeated daily in the state-controlled media.

Abdullah used a speech to an assembly of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) last Friday to issue his own warning to Bersih organisers, saying: "They are challenging me and I don't like being challenged." He demanded that rally be cancelled.

Police set up roadblocks on the outskirts of the capital and on major highways as far as the northern state of Kedah. Dozens of buses were turned back. *Time* magazine reported that the centre of Kuala Lumpur "resembled a fortress prepared for an invasion, with armed police in pairs on every corner." Thousands of riot police were deployed, backed by water cannon.

Despite the government's efforts to intimidate Bersih supporters, thousands took part and braved violent police attacks. While the police claimed that fewer than 10,000 participated, various international media reports put the demonstration at between 30,000 and 40,000.

The rally organisers planned to march several kilometres from the Jamek Mosque area to the king's palace to present a memorandum containing their demands for electoral reform. Police attacked demonstrators with tear gas and batons in an effort to break up the rally, but failed to prevent marchers from reaching their goal.

A report on the *Asia Times* web site described one incident when police charged demonstrators. "[S]uddenly police blitzed from the side, sending protestors scurrying. Some of

those caught were dragged to the ground and kicked and punched by several officers before being hauled away. Minutes later, police rushed the shop-lined alleys behind the Jamek Mosque area, barking and banging their clubs against drawn shop fronts, as shopkeepers and customers sought cover behind lattice doors. Plainclothesmen demanded those with cameras to shut them off or risk arrest. Back on Tuangku Abdul Rahman Road, police fired water cannons atop police trucks crawling towards retreating protestors."

According to police accounts, 245 people were arrested. Even though they were later released on bail, they face prosecution and jail terms of up to one year.

Bersih is calling on the head of state to ensure that national elections, expected early next year, are fair. It is demanding the removal of phantom voters from electoral rolls, the use of indelible ink to prevent illegal and multiple voting, the abolition of postal voting which is abused by the ruling parties and equal access to the state-owned media for all political parties.

The Malaysian media attempted to play down the protest. The state-run *New Strait Times* published an article on page four, headlined "Illegal gathering causes traffic chaos in city". But the government is undoubtedly deeply worried by the re-emergence of major protests. The three main opposition parties—the National Justice Party (Keadilan), the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party—are all part of the Bersih coalition.

The last large-scale anti-government protests in Malaysia took place in 1998, following the expulsion of Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters from UMNO. Anwar, who was deputy prime minister and finance minister, fell out with then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad over the direction of economic policy following the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis.

Anwar advocated the implementation of the IMF's demands for an opening up of the Malaysian economy, which would have impacted on already hard-hit business layers closely associated with UMNO. Mahathir rejected

Anwar's policies, imposed currency and capital controls and expelled Anwar from the party. When Anwar began to organise protests for *reformasi* or reforms, the Mahathir government had him arrested on trumped-up charges of corruption and sexual misconduct.

Anwar was convicted of the corruption charges and as a result is banned from seeking political office until next April. He was, however, released from jail in 2004 after his conviction for sodomy was overturned by the Federal Court. He took part in Saturday's rally and described it to the media as an "unqualified success".

The rally became a focus for what is clearly a groundswell of resentment and hostility to the government and its policies. Malaysiakini web site analyst James Wong, a government critic, told *Time* that the demonstrators came out "not just because of election reform but also to highlight a host of other grievances. The *International Herald Tribune* noted that the rally was well attended by "lower income Malays [who] may be becoming disillusioned with [UMNO] policies that mostly benefit the ruling elite."

A political scientist from the National University of Malaysia, who declined to be named because of fear of reprisals, told the Inter Press Services News Agency: "It is significant that many of the protestors this time were young, working class Malays, compared to the English-educated elite who took to the streets for Anwar a decade ago." These urban Malays, he said, were being hammered by stagnant private sector wages and the escalating cost of living. "They hold low-paying jobs and live in cramped, cheap flats outside the city and stare at a bleak future. These are the people the NEP has left behind."

The New Economic Policy (NEP) has been the cornerstone of UMNO's communal politics for more than three decades. Following the 1969 race riots in which UMNO had a direct hand, the NEP gave preferential treatment to indigenous Malays or Bumiputeras in business, government posts and education and discriminated against ethnic Chinese and Indians who comprise 40 percent of the population. The NEP benefited a narrow layer of the Malay ruling elite and middle class, not the majority of Malay workers and rural poor.

UMNO has already lost control of the northern, largely-rural Kelantan state assembly to the Islamist PAS party and now faces a renewed challenge by the National Justice Party (Keadilan), formed by Anwar's wife, for the urban Malay vote. Among Chinese and Indian voters, UMNO relies on its conservative coalition partners—Malaysian Chinese Association and Malaysian Indian Congress. If it were forced to reform the electoral system, the UMNO-coalition, which has held power since independence in 1957, would face serious losses in next year's poll.

The reemergence of Anwar as a political figure signals that the sharp differences over economic policy that erupted in 1998 have not been resolved. In recent comments, he has challenged the NEP, describing it as no longer relevant to Malaysia. Sections of the ruling elite regard the NEP and national economic controls as obstacles to integrating Malaysia into the global economy and attracting foreign investment. Anwar has repeatedly accused Prime Minister Abdullah of failing to implement serious economic reforms since replacing Mahathir in 2003.

Retiring European Union (EU) ambassador Thierry Rommel voiced the concerns of global capital about investing in Malaysia. He told Associated Press on November 14 that the country was a one-party state that discriminated against foreign investors and minorities to favour ethnic Malays. "You don't know as a foreigner, or a Malaysian citizen, where you exactly stand in terms of your rights." Rommel warned that the NEP was an obstacle to plans to negotiate a free trade agreement between the EU and Malaysia by 2009.

Abdullah has made some changes, including the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and the establishment of special economic zones for foreign investment. But he has already come under attack inside UMNO from Mahathir and his supporters for making even these marginal economic reforms. UMNO and sections of the Malay ruling elite not only fear that increased competition will undermine their business interests, but that an end to the NEP will undermine the basis of their communal politics.

The government also recognises the dangers posed by unleashing long pent-up opposition and hostility. If young, working class Malays are joining their Chinese and Indian counterparts to demand democratic rights and decent living standards, such a movement not only threatens UMNO's manipulation of communal divisions, but could go beyond the very limited demands espoused by opposition leaders such as Anwar.



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