

# Police attack ethnic Indian protestors in Malaysia

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On November 25, the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur was again the scene of a violent clash between riot police and protestors—this time involving thousands of ethnic Indians demanding compensation for decades of discrimination. The demonstration came just two weeks after an even larger rally of opposition groups on November 10 demanding electoral reform before national elections mooted for next year.

The latest demonstration involved at least 10,000 people, although some reports put the figure as high as 20,000. Ethnic Indians, mainly Tamils, make up about 8 percent of the country's 27 million population. Most are descended from Indian indentured labourers brought to Malaysia to work in rubber plantations in the nineteenth century under British colonial rule.

The march was organised by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), an alliance of 30 non-government Hindu organisations, in whose leadership lawyers are prominent. The right-wing communal orientation of the organisation is evident from its name and its appeal to Hindu Indians on the basis of ethnicity and religion.

The purpose of the demonstration was to present a petition to the British High Commission to support a lawsuit, filed in London on August 30, seeking \$US4 trillion in damages for the country's ethnic Indians. The suit seeks compensation for exploitation suffered under British rule and subsequent racial discrimination as a result of the constitution imposed by British at the time of independence in 1957.

Absurdly, Hindraf made a direct appeal to the British Queen to appoint a lawyer to argue the case in London. Protestors carried large posters featuring photographs of the British monarch. One banner in English and Tamil read: "The Queen of England—the symbol of justice, we still have hope in you." Many protestors had images of Mahatma Gandhi around their necks to

express the non-violent character of the march. Other banners declared: "We want our rights" and "We only want to tell you our problems... don't treat us like animals".

While formally addressed to the British government, the demonstration was obviously aimed at embarrassing the Malaysian government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. The government reacted by obtaining a court order making the rally illegal. On the eve of the march, it arrested three lawyers prominent in Hindraf, charging them with sedition. A court dismissed the sedition charges last week.

Some 5,000 police were mobilised to suppress the protest. In a threatening gesture, some displayed automatic rifles before the unarmed demonstrators. Clashes quickly erupted and, despite the use of water cannon and tear gas, continued for hours. Protest organisers reported that 240 people were arrested and more than 100 people were injured in the police attacks.

As well as supporting the lawsuit, the protestors demanded that the government end the discrimination against ethnic Indians and provide business licenses, better paying jobs and university scholarships. Others were incensed by the demolition of Hindu temples to make way for roads and housing developments.

Lawyer and Hindraf leader P. Uthayakumar told the *Asia Times* website the rally showed that the government could not continue to ignore the Indian community. "We are a force to reckon with," he said. Hindraf represents the interests of the ethnic Indian elite in Malaysia, which like its ethnic Chinese counterparts, has faced discrimination as a result of the New Economic Policy (NEP) imposed in 1970 to give preference to Malays in jobs, education and business.

At the same time, Hindraf is compelled to make an appeal to the majority of the ethnic Indians who are

among the poorest layers in Malaysia society. In his comments to *Asia Times*, Uthayakumar claimed that Hindraf was stepping up its fight principally to help poorly-paid Indian factory and plantation labourers, who were being hit by economic slowdown and rising prices for fuel and food.

The article referred to the case of Indian truck driver Selvarajah Ramakrishnan who had journeyed overnight from a country area to join the protest. He had applied for a driving permit for 15 years without success. To work he must rent a government permit from its Malay holders for 400 ringgit (\$US119). “Why should I have to suffer discrimination in my own country?” he asked.

An Asia Sentinel report explained that many Indian labourers had been forced to move into urban slums after their rubber plantations were converted to housing estates and golf courses. The report cited a *Time* article in 2000, which put the ethnic Indian share of national wealth at 1.5 percent, compared to 19.4 percent for Malays and 38.5 percent for Chinese. Ethnic Indians had the highest suicide rates and 15 percent of Indians in Kuala Lumpur were squatters.

The conservative Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which is part of the ruling coalition led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), condemned the November 25 protest. Clearly concerned to preserve its political monopoly, MIC leader S. Samy Vellu, declared: “We represent the Indian community and will remain so.” The MIC represents a small layer of well-off Indians who have benefitted from their political and economic connections to UMNO.

Opposition leaders condemned the police violence. Lim Kit Siang of the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) criticised the “excessive use of force” as “unjustified” and blamed the prime minister for the police actions. He warned that the government faced a backlash at the national elections, which may be called early next year.

Opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy UMNO leader and deputy prime minister until his falling out with the regime over the direction of economic policy following the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998, also condemned the police attack. However, he warned that Hindraf’s protest might serve to increase racial tension and conflict. “They should be more inclusive,” he said. “We must champion the cause of all races, not just Indians.”

Anwar’s appeal to secularism and more inclusive policies is in line with his recent criticisms of the NEP. He declared that UMNO’s discrimination in favour of Malays only benefitted the wealthy and acted as a barrier to foreign investment, threatening to turn Malaysia into a backwater of the global economy. In 1998, he criticised government corruption, as well as the imposition of capital and currency controls, from the same standpoint and supported the imposition of the International Monetary Fund’s demands.

Anwar’s opposition to Hindraf’s communal politics is, however, completely hypocritical. The opposition National Justice Party (Keadilan) established by his wife is in a loose coalition with the DAP and the Islamist Parti se-Malaysia Islam (PAS), both of which are communally-based parties. PAS goes beyond the present government’s discrimination in favour of Islam by calling for the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia—an appeal with which Anwar has flirted in the past.

All these parties attempt to make an appeal to the poor, but, like the government, are terrified at unleashing a mass movement of working people who may begin to make their own class demands. All the parties, in one way or another, accept the framework of communal politics through which UMNO has ruled since 1957, as the essential means for dividing the working class along religious and ethnic lines.

The protests on November 10 and November 25 indicate that a politicisation is underway in Malaysia. But there can be no solution to the common problems facing working people—Malay, Chinese and Indian—without a complete political break from the communal politics of the opposition parties and groups such as Hindraf.



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