

Malaysian police crack down on protest over price rises

Our correspondent
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Fifty-six people, including leaders of Malaysia's opposition parties and non-government organisations, were detained last Saturday in a police crackdown on a demonstration over price rises. The protest in Kuala Lumpur involved several hundred people and was organised by the Coalition Against Inflation, which includes the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), the National Justice Party or Keadilan, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM).

A day before the demonstration, police obtained a court restraining order and warned people against any involvement. Under Section 27(8) of the Police Act, any assembly in a public place of more than five persons is prohibited unless permitted by police. The Act, which directly contradicts the right to free assembly in the country's constitution, is routinely used to ban public rallies by all but government-aligned parties and organisations.

The police mobilised around a thousand officers from the Federal Reserve Unit and a voluntary force, RELA, in anticipation of the protests. Arrests began even before the demonstration was due to start at 3.00 p.m. Six people, all members of PAS, were detained in front of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) near the Petronas Twin Towers.

More people were arbitrarily arrested at the KLCC and Ampang Park LRT Station even though they had not yet assembled. Keadilan spokesman Tian Chua and PAS treasurer Dr Hatta Ramli were detained while giving press interviews at a roadside restaurant near the Australian High Commission office. A lawyer, Jonson Chong, was also arrested at the site when he tried to stop police manhandling the men.

At 3.30 p.m., around 200 PSM members started to move from Ampang Park to the KLCC but were

blocked by police. Within minutes the arrests began. A journalist from Malaysiakini, an independent media organisation, was also detained after attempting to question a police officer. Others arrested included PSM secretary Arutchelvam Subramaniam, DAP leader Ronnie Liew, PSM chairman Dr Mohd Nasir and Malaysian Youth and Student Democratic Movement leader Simon Oii.

Lawyers were refused access to their clients on the day of the arrests. Ten of the 56 detainees were released around midnight on Saturday. The remaining 46 were charged by the police and brought to court before finally being released on bail of 1,000 ringgit (RM) or about \$US309.

With speculation that national elections may be held in March, the government is clearly determined to clamp down on any opposition protests. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's approval rating of 61 percent in December was down 10 percent compared to November and the lowest since he took power in 2004. While the demonstration was small, disaffection and anger over rising prices for basic commodities is far broader.

PAS parliamentarian Datuk Kamarrudin Jaffar told Radio Australia: "Food, fuel, toll rates for highways in Kuala Lumpur and the general frustration of increasing cost of things, including school fees [is rising].... The government, in the budget presented last September, said there would be no more school fees, but the parents found out in January that we have to pay all those kinds of extra fees—association fees, library fees, toilet fees, and all those kinds of things."

Fuel price rises are a particular concern. The Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER), which advises the government, indicated recently that petrol may increase by as much as RM 0.80 a

litre—from RM 1.92 to RM 2.72. The government currently subsidises fuel. The country's inflation rate hit a 10-month high of 2.4 percent in December, caused by higher food and transport costs. MIER has forecast worsening inflation and greater burdens for working people.

The difficulties created by rising prices have been compounded by shortages of basic commodities. A serious shortage of cooking oil recently hit some states. The country has also experienced a shortage of flour. In some cases, businesses have cut production to pressure the government to raise its ceiling price on certain products.

The government has ruled out any measures to alleviate the impact of rising prices. Second finance minister Nor Mohamed Yakcop warned that the cost of fuel price subsidies could rise to RM 35 billion in 2008, up from RM 20 billion last year, if crude oil prices remain at close to \$US100 a barrel. Prime Minister Abdullah warned in November that subsidies would have to be cut. The last time the government cut the subsidy was in February 2006, sending the inflation rate to a seven-year high.

The opposition parties involved in the Coalition Against Inflation offer no solution to the social crisis. Keadilan's de facto leader, Anwar Ibrahim, is committed to far reaching market reforms "with a human face" which would only deepen the gulf between rich and poor. The social democratic DAP and Islamic fundamentalist PAS also dress up their commitment to the market with proposals for limited welfare reforms. By supporting this coalition, the PSM, which claims to be socialist, is subordinating workers and young people to these capitalist parties.

The demonstration last weekend was the latest in a series of opposition protests. On November 10, police violently attacked a march in Kuala Lumpur for electoral reform numbering in the tens of thousands—the country's largest protest in nearly a decade. On November 25, riot police clashed with thousands of ethnic Indians demanding compensation for decades of discrimination. In early January, a smaller candle light vigil was held to show solidarity with the victims of the country's draconian Internal Security Act, which allows for indefinite detention without trial.

The latest police actions are aimed at stifling any political dissent and indicate a growing fear in the

ruling coalition of the potential for social unrest.



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