

Malaysian government crackdown on political opponents

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The Malaysian government of Prime Minister Najib Razak carried out a wave of arrests last month in a bid to stem opposition to its ousting of the state government in Perak earlier this year. More than 160 supporters of the national opposition People Alliance (PR), comprising the Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), have been detained.

The unseating of the PR's Perak chief minister Nizar Jamaluddin by the Sultan of Perak was ruled unconstitutional by a High Court judge on May 11. That decision, however, was overturned by the Appeals Court on May 22, making Zambry Abdul Kadir, from Prime Minister Najib's Barisan Nasional (BN), the new chief minister. The Appeals Court ignored a provision in the Perak state constitution requiring a no-confidence vote in the state legislature.

Protests began in February after the Sultan, the hereditary head of Perak state, refused Nizar's request to dissolve the assembly and call new elections. Four PR defectors had given BN a majority in the state legislature, but they were unlikely to retain their seat in a fresh election. Perak was one of the five of Malaysia's 13 states that the PR won in the March 2008 elections, that also saw BN lose its two-thirds majority in the national parliament for the first time.

Police had broken up an opposition protest march in February but the current arrests began on May 5 when Wong Chin Haut, a leader of the electoral reform group Bersih, was arrested at his home in Kuala Lumpur. Previously, he had called at a press conference for black armbands to be worn to protest the Perak

takeover. Among the dozens subsequently rounded up were 16 people detained at a candlelight vigil on May 21.

On May 22, plainclothes police raided the offices of the DAP, which draws its electoral support largely from the country's sizeable ethnic Chinese minority. DAP leader Lim Kit Siang told the media this was the first such raid in the party's 42-year history. Police entered the DAP offices without a warrant and seized a computer. They said they were looking for seditious material handed out in protests against the Perak takeover. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim from Keadilan denounced the raid as "an insult to the constitution and the rule of law".

Further arrests took place during a three-day hunger strike that ended on May 28. At the start of the protest, 19 PR assemblymen and supporters were arrested and held for five hours before being released on bail.

Despite avoiding a new election in Perak, Najib is clearly concerned by his failure to halt the slide in electoral support for the BN since he replaced Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi on April 3. The BN has lost five out of six by-elections. Most recently, BN did not even field a candidate for the by-election on May 31 for a state assembly seat in Kedah, fearing another humiliation. The Keadilan candidate gained 5,558 of the 6,052 votes cast, with a low turnout of just 46 percent.

Najib has come under pressure from his own United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)—the main BN partner—to crack down on the opposition parties. UMNO has used Malay chauvinism, electoral

gerrymander and police-state methods, as well extensive political control over the courts and the media, to maintain itself in power since 1957.

The BN's losses in the 2008 national election unnerved the UMNO leadership, resulting in Abdullah being pushed aside. Keadilan came together with the DAP and the Islamist PAS in an alliance, albeit a rather unstable one. Anwar clearly spoke for sections of big business who increasingly regard UMNO and its discriminatory policies against the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities as a barrier to economic development.

In 1998, Anwar, then finance minister, was expelled from UMNO by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad following bitter disagreements over economic policy. Anwar championed the International Monetary Fund's pro-market agenda, whereas Mahathir insisted on capital and currency controls to protect layers of Malay businessmen linked to UMNO. Anwar was arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges of corruption and homosexuality, but since his release has led the opposition to BN.

Those behind Anwar, including international investment fund and money market managers, view the current economic crisis as an opportunity to push through pro-market "reforms". Certainly there is a sense that UMNO, caught in its web of crony interests built up over decades, is faltering. Last week PAS publicly rejected government efforts to woo it away from PR into the ruling BN coalition.

The opposition has continued the pressure on Najib. An unnamed political commentator connected to the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a BN partner, told the *Asian Sentinel* last month: "Part of the pressure is due to the Barisan's self-inflicted mess in Perak. But part of it is also the overwhelming confidence of the opposition who believe they are witnessing the dying days of Barisan."

Since coming to office, Najib has attempted to undercut the opposition by appeasing business and suggesting that policies discriminating in favour of Malays would be modified. In April he announced that foreign investors in tourism, health, business and

technological services would no longer be required to have ethnic Malay partners. Foreign capital would also be allowed to own up to 70 percent, up from 49 percent, of local non-commercial investment banks and insurers.

In April and early May, the government released five members of the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) who had been arrested in December 2007. They were detained following protests by ethnic Indians against economic marginalisation. The release was in part aimed at shoring up BN's coalition partner, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Like the MCA, the MIC was decimated in the 2008 poll and both organisations have shown signs of disintegrating.

Social tensions have been rising as a result of the country's deepening economic crisis. In the first quarter of 2009, GDP contracted by 5.1 percent seasonally adjusted from the previous quarter—the largest fall since the last quarter of 1998. Exports fell by 15.2 percent and domestic consumption only held up due to a huge government stimulus package. Najib is now predicting that the economy could contract by 4-5 percent in 2009—far worse than previous predictions of a 1 percent decline.

The crackdown in Perak makes clear that Najib and his government will use all available means, including police repression, to cling to office. Anwar is still being pursued over new charges of sodomy concocted last year to smear the opposition leader and lay the basis for his removal from parliament. The trial begins next month.



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