

Mass arrests at Malaysian protest

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Last Saturday thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur to demand the repeal of the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA). Police responded with beatings, tear gas, water cannon and mass arrests.

The rally was called by the parliamentary opposition and civil right groups. An estimated 10,000 people—mostly ethnic Malays—took part in the protest. It was the largest political demonstration since a Hindraf rally in 2007 calling for an end to official discrimination against the country's ethnic Indian minority.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim told Saturday's rally: "We gather today to fight a cruel law under a cruel administration." The ISA is a sweeping law allowing for indefinite detention without trial or charge on national security grounds. In practice, the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has used the ISA to jail political opponents, including UMNO dissidents.

Gatherings of more than four people are banned without a police permit, which is virtually never granted to opposition parties and organisations. At 2 p.m. protesters attempted to march from the national mosque to the residence of the king, who is also head of state, to present a petition calling for the repeal of the ISA.

The police reaction was ruthless. Deputy Inspector General of Police Ismail Omar told Reuters: "We will keep on arresting until we can shut down this demonstration." According to Agence France Presse, 589 people were detained. While most were later released, 29 people were charged in court on Monday, including a teenage boy, for taking part in an illegal rally.

Prime Minister Najib Rasak fully supported the police crackdown, telling the media that the

participants had been warned not to hold the rally. Najib's comments end the pretence that his government would moderate the use of police-state measures. After he came to office in April, Najib promised a comprehensive review of the ISA and released 13 political detainees.

Since taking over from Abdullah Badawi, Najib has been seeking to undermine the opposition Peoples Alliance (PR) led by Anwar. The PR inflicted a serious setback on the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition at last year's national elections, ending its two-thirds parliamentary majority and taking control of 5 of the country's 13 state governments. UMNO has held power in Malaysia since formal independence in 1957.

Najib's initial gestures toward democratic reform were accompanied by other moves to implement aspects of PR's agenda and undercut its support. In the midst of the global recession, his government relaxed restrictions on the foreign ownership of companies and financial institutions. UMNO's communal discrimination in favour of ethnic Malays in business, education and employment has become a barrier to foreign investment.

At the same time, however, Najib has used UMNO's grip over the state apparatus against the opposition parties. His government is continuing to pursue trumped-up charges against Anwar of engaging in homosexual acts, which are illegal in Malaysia. The charges were laid last year and the trial began last month. Anwar has denied the allegations. His defence team was finally given access to the prosecution's medical evidence on the orders of the judge.

The case is virtually identical to the bogus charges laid against Anwar in 1998. In the midst of the Asian financial crisis, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad sacked Anwar as finance minister and deputy prime minister, and expelled him from UMNO, following sharp differences over economic policy. Concerned

about the impact on pro-UMNO businesses, Mahathir opposed Anwar's embrace of International Monetary Fund demands for the opening up of the Malaysian economy.

When Anwar began organising opposition rallies, he was arrested, beaten and held under the ISA, then finally charged with corruption and sexual misconduct. The sodomy charge was overturned in 2004 when an appeals court ruled there was a lack of evidence in the original conviction. Anwar entered parliament last year via a by-election after a five-year ban on political activity expired.

Najib was involved in the new charges against Anwar from the outset. He initially denied knowing the alleged "victim," Saiful Bukhari Azian, but was forced to change his story after the opposition pointed out that the two had met in Najib's office immediately before Saiful went to the police. The opposition alleges that Saiful was planted in Anwar's campaign team.

Najib was also involved in the ousting of PR as the state government in Perak. After three members of the state assembly were induced to switch sides, the Sultan of Perak summarily dismissed the chief minister and blocked his call for a fresh state election. As opposition protests erupted, the police arrested dozens of people and raided the offices of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) to seize allegedly "seditious" material. DAP is a component of the PR coalition.

The death of Teoh Beng Hock, a senior advisor to the PR-controlled Selangor state government, on July 16 has further underscored the police-state methods in Malaysia. Teoh fell to his death from the offices of the headquarters of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) in Selangor. His body was found on the roof of an adjoining five-storey building after he had been interrogated by MACC over the alleged misuse of state funds.

A government minister initially claimed that Teoh had committed suicide, but his belt and back pockets were torn, leading to speculation that he was forced out the window. By the MACC's admission, 28 of its officers had questioned Teoh from 6 p.m. until 3.45 a.m. At the initial hearing of a coronial inquiry, lawyers representing the attorney general opposed a request by lawyers for Teoh's family, the state government and the Bar Association to hand over witness statements.

The subject of Teoh's interrogation suggests that

UMNO, via the MACC, was fishing for evidence to use against the PR-controlled state government in Selangor. The pro-government press has responded to the death by ludicrously claiming that it was part of an opposition conspiracy to undermine ethnic Malay control of government institutions.

Outrage over Teoh's death was one of the reasons prompting a large turnout at the opposition protest last Saturday.



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