

Police conduct “terrorist” raids on eve of Australian election

Mike Head
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Just two days before the Australian general election, federal and state police yesterday conducted dawn raids in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth on 17 homes and offices of Kurdish Australians in what the police described as a “joint counter terrorism investigation”.

In the Melbourne suburb of Pascoe Vale, Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Victoria Police officers arrived at the offices of the Kurdish Association of Victoria at 6 am and spent most of the day searching the premises and removing material. Police also raided homes in the suburbs of Glenroy, Coolaroo and Dandenong. In Sydney, the Australian Kurdish Association offices in Bankstown were raided, as were five premises in Sydney’s south-west and north-west, and five premises in suburban Perth. Late yesterday, officers were still combing through the Morley headquarters of the Kurdish Association of Western Australia.

No arrests were made. However, files, computers, mobile phones, financial documents, books and other reading material, cash, notes, DVDs, news articles, flags and business cards were seized.

The AFP offered no explanation for the timing of the raids. In a brief written statement, the AFP said it wanted to assure the public that the operation did not relate to “any terrorist related threat or incident”. Instead, the investigation concerned “allegations of financing of a terrorist organisation”.

The AFP did not specify the organisation, but police leaks to the media indicate that it is the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish separatist group based in Turkey that the previous Howard government controversially listed as a terrorist organisation under the draconian counter-terrorism laws in 2005. The Labor government has maintained the ban since taking office in 2007.

The Kurdish Association has actively campaigned for the lifting of the ban, which was imposed by executive order after the Turkish prime minister visited Canberra. In response to the police raids, the group issued a statement saying it supported

the PKK’s cause but did not provide it with funds.

Yesterday’s politically sensitive raids would not have proceeded without the federal government’s approval. In effect, the operation constitutes a demonstration that Labor remains fully committed to the bogus “war on terror” and will use its police-state powers against a widening range of organisations.

At least seven police cars arrived at the Kurdish Association offices in Pascoe Vale just before dawn. Armed officers sealed off the area, barring the organisation’s staff and members from entering the building, while sniffer dogs combed the scene.

Worried members of the association gathered outside the offices, and some spoke to the WSWS. Gulay Baykal said the events were “a big shock”. She commented: “It’s interesting that it’s happened before the election. One of the raids was the house of the president of the Kurdish Association at 5.30 this morning. There were 8 to 15 police in each group. They were armed. They had dogs. Children were terrified. A 6- or 7-year-old was involved. People are saying, ‘This is the sort of thing that we escaped from in Kurdistan.’”

Baykal drew attention to the presence of the mass media on the scene. “For long years we have tried to attract media attention to what is happening to the Kurds. The [Turkish] prisons are full of political prisoners. There are 3,000 underage children in jail. Unfortunately the media were not interested, but now the media is here.”

Cigdem Guler added: “We’re not a threat to the Australian community. The government knows that. Nothing is done without their knowledge. On Sunday, Kelvin Thomson (the local Labor MP) spoke at our meeting. When they want our votes, they come. Where are they now?”

The Pascoe Vale offices provide a range of services to Kurdish migrants, including settlement, advocacy, referral, education and health advice. The association also offers cultural and recreational programs, such as folk dancing, traditional

music and Kurdish language lessons.

A solicitor representing the association, Chris Ryan, told journalists he had seen the search warrant and it was dated several days ago. He pointed out that the raids could have been conducted after the election. “The timing of this is not coincidental,” he said. “[It’s] to show they are tough on terror before an election.”

Ryan revealed that at a meeting several weeks ago he had raised with federal Attorney-General Rob McClelland concerns expressed by members of the Kurdish community that the government’s continued listing of the PKK as a terrorist organisation could see Kurds unfairly targeted by police. Ryan said McClelland had simply replied that it was up to Kurdish people to submit a de-listing proposal to parliament.

The Socialist Equality Party fundamentally opposes the PKK’s perspective of seeking to overcome the oppression of the Kurdish minority through the establishment of a separate capitalist nation-state (see “The politics of the PKK: a balance sheet”).

Nevertheless, the SEP unconditionally opposes the anti-democratic ban on the PKK. It is not a terrorist group, but a political organisation. While the PKK has certainly been involved in actions targeting civilians in Turkish cities as well as in small villages, successive Turkish governments are responsible for the armed conflict. The Turkish military and allied fascist gangs have a long history of terrorism against the Kurdish minority and other political opponents.

Yesterday’s raids demonstrate how the “anti-terrorism” legislation—introduced by the Howard government with Labor’s backing, and maintained by Labor since 2007—can be used not only to victimise and demonise Muslims but also to criminalise anyone seen by the Australian government as politically undesirable.

The legislation features sweeping definitions of “terrorist act” and “terrorist organisation”. Anyone can be jailed for up to 25 years for donating to, or supporting, an overseas political group alleged to be attempting to “intimidate” or “coerce” a government, including by threatening to disrupt infrastructure. These provisions apply even if the group is also involved in humanitarian projects.

Under these vague definitions, people could have been jailed as “terrorists” for giving money to the anti-apartheid movement, Irish republican causes, or East Timorese independence groups. Whether an organisation is officially designated “terrorist” or a “liberation movement” depends entirely on the political needs and calculations of the major

world powers and the Australian government of the day.

In 2007, three prominent Tamil Australians were arrested on charges of being members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and providing funds to the LTTE, knowing it to be “a terrorist organisation”. Two years later, those charges were dropped, partly because the LTTE had not been banned in Australia. However, the men were convicted on five remaining charges under the little-known Charter of the United Nations Act 1945 of providing money to a “proscribed organisation”. A judge sentenced them to the time they had already served—the 11 weeks in prison before being granted bail.

By the time of the 2007 election, the anti-terrorism laws became discredited by the exposure of a series of frame-ups involving alleged Muslim terrorist suspects, including Mohamed Haneef, Itzar ul-Haque, David Hicks and Jack Thomas. The incoming Labor government pledged to “re-establish public confidence” in the laws by conducting a judicial inquiry into Haneef’s case. The ultimate result has been the bolstering of the laws, including plans to make it even more difficult for terrorist defendants to obtain bail, and expanding the definition of terrorism to include psychological harm, terrorist hoaxes, threats and “inciting violence”.

For six years, the Howard government stoked fears of terrorism to provide a pretext for anti-democratic “terrorism” laws and to justify its participation in the US-led military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Labor government has maintained a similar course, with far-reaching implications for basic legal and civil rights. The SEP unequivocally condemns yesterday’s raids and calls for the repeal of all the federal and state “anti-terror” legislation enacted since 2002 in the fraudulent “war on terror”.



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