Malaysian opposition leader suspended from parliament

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There was uproar and a walkout by opposition politicians from the Malaysian parliament on December 16 when government members voted to suspend opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and three other opposition members for six months.

The suspensions reduced the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition from 76 to 72 seats in the 222-seat lower parliamentary house until the end of June next year. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Prime Minister Najib Razak's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has thus regained a two-thirds parliamentary majority, which it lost for the first time in 52 years in the March 2008 elections.

A two-thirds majority is required to amend the constitution and alter electoral boundaries. The opposition and sections of the media are warning that the government is likely to use its regained powers to gerrymander electorates in favour of BN and call an early election, which is not due until 2013.

The move against Anwar began when the Speaker Pandikar Amin Mulia allowed a vote on a recommendation of the Rights and Privileges Committee to suspend Anwar without a debate. The committee had found that Anwar had "misled" parliament by claiming there was a link between Najib's attempts to repackage the country's racially-based electoral system as "1Malaysia" and the 1999 campaign by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak for "One Israel".

Anwar also accused the Apco Worldwide public relations firm, which the government had hired to promote the "1Malaysia" initiative, of having ties with the Israeli state. Malaysia does not have diplomatic relations with Israel, whose treatment of Palestinians is widely loathed.

The walkout began after the speaker, who is also chairman of the Privileges Committee, allowed the minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Nazri Abdul Aziz, to read a second motion calling for the suspension of PR leaders Azmin Ali and R Sivarasa, who both belong to Anwar's Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), and prominent lawyer Karpal Singh of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP).

The three opposition figures were members of the Rights and Privileges Committee. The motion to suspend them was moved on the grounds that they had made public the workings of the committee as it dealt with Anwar's suspension. They had revealed that Anwar had not been allowed to defend himself during the deliberations and that the committee had relied solely on a letter from Apco Worldwide to dismiss Anwar's allegations against the company.

DAP leader Lim Kit Siang denounced the suspension of the four opposition members as demonstrating "bias, unfairness and utter disregard of parliamentary conventions and accepted practices". As opposition members walked out they shouted "Apco!" and showed placards reading "Kangaroo Court".

The parliamentary suspensions are one aspect of a stepped-up UMNO-led campaign against the opposition. A second prong of the government's attack is its persistent attempts to convict Anwar on charges of sodomy—a crime in Malaysia.

Anwar is facing such charges for the second time. The first were laid amid a bitter split within UMNO over economic policy following the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998. At the time, Anwar was deputy prime minister and finance minister. He publicly opposed Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed over his refusal to implement the restructuring policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund and foreign capital. Anwar was sacked and, along with his supporters, expelled from UMNO.

Mahathir instead introduced capital and currency controls

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to prop up the protected Malay businesses clustered around UMNO. Anwar began to organise rallies and gained widespread support for his criticisms of UMNO's autocratic rule and its discriminatory policies against the country's ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities. In this climate of political tension, Anwar was arrested, beaten by the country's police chief and later charged with sodomy and abuse of authority.

Anwar was convicted on both trumped-up charges, and spent six years in prison. In 2004 the Federal Court squashed the sodomy conviction because of "unreliable evidence," but the bogus prosecution had served its purpose. Mahathir had stabilised the political situation and handed the government over to his successor, Abdullah Badawi.

The latest charges of sodomy were brought forward in July 2008 as UMNO faced a new crisis. In March 2008, it had lost its two-thirds majority in the national parliament and the control of five of the nation's 13 states to the Anwar-led opposition. The charges were laid as Anwar was preparing to contest a by-election. After Najib succeeded Abdullah in April 2009, he immediately stepped up the campaign to undermine the opposition.

Last week, in a signal that the government is determined to press ahead with the new charges, the pro-government press made great fanfare of cables released by WikiLeaks which indicate that Singapore government intelligence officials believed that the new allegation of sodomy was true, but that it was the outcome of a set-up organised by UMNO.

Anwar denounced the charges to a crowd of supporters on December 14 and challenged both Singapore and Prime Minister Najib to provide evidence. Anwar noted that newspapers like the UMNO-owned *Utusan Malaysia* had blocked the reference in the cables to allegations that Najib was connected to the murder of the Mongolian model known as Altantuya.

The new charges have all the hallmarks of a political frame-up. Saiful Bukhari Azian, the former aide with whom Anwar is supposed to have had the homosexual liaison, is, like the "victim" in the 2000 case, a vulnerable figure with proven connections to UMNO, including with Najib. The defence team has provided an alibi for the time the offence is alleged to have occurred on June 26, 2008.

The government's campaign against the opposition is being driven by economic and political considerations. Uncertain economic conditions make it dangerous to wait until 2013 for new national elections. While the government expects GDP to grow by over 5 percent next year, Malaysia is vulnerable to any economic slowdown in China.

A large proportion of Malaysian exports to its Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) partners—25.3 percent of total exports in the period January to October 2010—are ultimately re-exported to China. China directly accounts for 12.6 percent of Malaysia's trade. The country's other major export destinations—Japan and the United States—are both mired in economic stagnation.

Furthermore, the government is worried by the decline in foreign direct investment (FDI). From 2008 to 2009, FDI collapsed by 81 percent, from $US7.3 billion to just $1.4 billion, threatening the economy's long term prospects. In June 2009, the government began to announce pro-foreign investment reforms to open new areas of the economy. The government's "Economic Transformation Program" has the stated aim of attracting $US400 billion worth of new investment over the next 10 years.

UMNO's actions have the character of a pre-emptive strike to shatter the opposition ahead of potential economic and political turmoil. In doing so, it is exploiting the shift in Washington's attitude toward both the BN regime and Anwar.

In 1998, US Vice President Al Gore publicly sided with Anwar in his arguments with Mahathir and was critical of Anwar's subsequent prosecution. Last month, however, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Malaysia, she refused to comment on the new charges against Anwar and declined to meet him.

The UMNO leadership understands that 12 years after the Asian financial crisis, Washington's main concern in South East Asia is primarily to stem the growing influence of China. Clinton's visits to South East Asian countries have centred on strengthening US diplomatic and military ties in the region. To the extent that the BN government has gone along with Washington, despite some reservations about antagonising China, any US support for Anwar and the opposition has been put aside.

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