

Malaysian government cracks down on electoral reform rally

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Acting under the instructions of Prime Minister Najib Razak's government, police launched a violent assault on demonstrators gathered in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur on Saturday. An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people were attempting to march to the city's Merdeka Stadium to support the demand of the Bersih (Clean and Fair Elections) coalition for electoral reforms.

Police attacked the protestors with batons, tear gas and water cannon firing chemical-laced liquids. According to the police, 1,667 people were arrested. *Malaysian Insider* reported that one opposition supporter, Baharuddin Ahmad, died in a scuffle at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. His family accused the police of an act of "cruelty."

Among the dozens of injured was Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister and now leader of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition. One of his bodyguards was reported to have received serious facial injuries when police fired a tear gas canister at Anwar.

Najib brushed aside opposition denunciations of the police operation. At a media conference, he congratulated the police for using "minimum force" and avoiding "actual physical contact with the demonstrators."

Despite the limited character of the Bersih coalition's call for electoral reform, the government was clearly unnerved by the rally. It locked down the centre of the capital from Friday night. Public transport was shut down, razor wire-protected police checkpoints were established and dire warnings were issued to stay away from the protest.

A week before the rally, police held an exercise in which they held banners exclaiming: "Disperse or we will shoot you." Najib personally urged right-wing Malay *silah* martial arts groups to fight Bersih

supporters, whom he described as "evil enemies."

For weeks beforehand, the government carried out a program of intimidation. Over 200 people were arrested, some for simply wearing yellow Bersih t-shirts. They were charged with offences ranging from promoting illegal assemblies to waging war against the king.

One factor in the government's response was fear of wider public unrest in the wake of the uprisings that have erupted in Egypt and throughout the Middle East. An unnamed former senior official of the Malaysian Chinese Association, a government coalition partner, was quoted in the media as saying that the government was "terrified of a Malaysian Tahrir Square. They will do anything, anything to stop that."

This alarm was evident despite the efforts of Bersih to keep the discontent within the framework of appealing to the political establishment to permit electoral changes. This line continued after the crackdown, with the Bersih web site calling on "all Malaysians to continue to work to peacefully achieve clean and fair electoral process in our country."

Bersih is a coalition of 62 NGOs, including Amnesty International, supported by the three main bourgeois opposition parties—Anwar's Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS).

The "Bersih 2.0" demands included calls for a cleanup of the electoral rolls, voters to be marked with indelible ink to stop multiple voting, reform of postal voting, fair access to the mass media and a 21-day campaign period to prevent short, surprise elections. Bersih steering committee member Wong Chin Huat told the media that 2.5 million young people were kept off the rolls while many ghost voters were kept on.

The protest was the biggest in the capital since Bersih led a similar demonstration in November 2007 that attracted 40,000. At the 2008 election, held four months after the 2007 rally, the government, then led by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, lost its decades-long two-thirds majority in the national parliament. The opposition parties also gained power in five of the country's 13 states.

The result was a serious blow to the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which leads the ruling coalition and has governed Malaysia using police-state measures since formal independence in 1957. UMNO has centrally relied on the communal politics of Malay nationalism, giving preference to the country's Malay majority over the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

In the lead-up to this year's planned "Walk for Democracy," Bersih leaders sought to reach an accommodation with the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) government, but negotiations broke down over the use of a stadium to stage the rally. Bersih then agreed with the head of state, King Mizan Zainal Abidin, to call off the march in return for the use of a stadium.

The government initially accepted the deal, then reneged. Bersih was declared an illegal organisation, allowing the police to ban the assembly under an old colonial law prohibiting the gathering of more than five people without police permission.

One of the Najib administration's concerns was its widely reported intention to call the next election well ahead of the March 2013 due date. It did not want a repeat of the 2007 events where the Bersih demonstration was seen as contributing to the opposition gains in the 2008 election.

Another factor was continuing fierce in-fighting within the Malaysian elite, dating back to 1998, when Anwar was expelled from UMNO by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad amid sharp 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, and has since been charged yet again with sodomy.

Anwar speaks 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. Those behind Anwar, including international financiers, view the demand for electoral changes as a vehicle to push for pro-market "reforms." In an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, former US ambassador to Malaysia John R. Malott described Saturday's protest "a brave step" toward democracy and said UMNO was "running scared" of losing power.

Both camps in this conflict are aware that broader discontent could erupt beyond the limited electoral aims of the Bersih leaders. While the economy is expected to grow by 5 percent in 2011, little of this has filtered through to ordinary people. Traders say that some food prices are rising at the rate of 20 to 30 percent a year. In May, the government's raised electricity prices by 7.1 percent, the first rise in three years. Officially, the central bank predicts prices may rise by 3.5 percent in 2011, compared with 1.7 percent in 2010.

Since he became UMNO leader in 2009, Najib has followed a two-pronged strategy to recover from the electoral setback of 2008. He has sought to appease foreign investors by moderating the preferential treatment of ethnic Malay businesses, while conducting an aggressive campaign against the Anwar-led opposition, including bribes and threats to regain control of Perak state and the use of the anti-corruption agency to target opposition figures.

The effect has been to build up resentment among those social layers who saw the 2008 political upset as the basis for political change. Commentators pointed to the predominance of disaffected young protestors from all ethnic groups in Saturday's demonstration.



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