

Malaysian government cracks down on opposition protesters

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23 July 2011

Malaysian government officials have resorted to police-state laws to prosecute protesters who took part in or supported the July 9 rally in Kuala Lumpur that demanded the reform of the country's electoral system.

Riot police attacked the rally with tear gas, water cannon and baton charges, making 1,697 arrests from a demonstration estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000. The country's largest protest since 2007 had been organised by Bersih (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections), an alliance of 62 non-government organisations and supported by the country's main parliamentary opposition, the three-party Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

The government and police brushed off domestic and international criticism of the heavy-handed treatment dished out to protesters and blamed the violence on the demonstrators. Home Affairs Minister Hishammuddin Hussein declared that he intended to take action against the media for "baseless claims" about police violence.

All those arrested on the day were released that evening but Hishammuddin warned that the Attorney General was studying "the seriousness of their offenses to determine whether to charge them or not." Without presenting any evidence, he alleged that Bersih was receiving funds from foreign sources and was connected to arms caches.

In order to whip up an anti-communist scare campaign, the government has cracked down on the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM), a leftist organisation linked to Pakatan Rakyat. Police detained 31 party members on June 25, as part of efforts to prevent the July 9 rally from taking place. In all, 270 people were

arrested prior to the protest.

Penang deputy police chief Abdul Rahim declared that 28 confiscated T-shirts had been promoting outlawed "communist" ideas. The offending T-shirts had images of Che Guevara and Chin Peng, an exiled and elderly leader of the now defunct Communist Party of Malaya. Abdul Rahim claimed that 600 seized pamphlets advertising the Bersih rally contained "seditious content."

Police used a raft of anti-democratic laws to justify the detentions, including the Printing Presses and Publication Act, Police Act, Societies Act and Sedition Act. The alleged crimes included wearing Bersih T-shirts, promoting Bersih's aims and possessing or printing Bersih posters. The Home Affairs Ministry proscribed Bersih as an illegal organisation on July 1, despite it being an umbrella organisation for 62 legally registered societies.

The detained PSM members had been travelling by bus from Kedah to Penang to promote the Bersih rally and were stopped at a police checkpoint. After finding T-shirts and pamphlets, 31 were detained under four charges—illegal assembly, sedition, publishing illegal pamphlets and leaflets and waging war against the king contrary to Section 122 of the Penal Code. The latter charge carries a penalty of life imprisonment.

All the PSM detainees were released on bail on July 2 but six leaders were rearrested and detained under the country's draconian Emergency (Public Order and Prevention of Crime) Ordinance 1969, which allows for detention without charge or trial for 60 days—renewable up to two years.

Among those detained is Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj, who was elected to the national parliament in 2008. Lawyers have obtained a Habeas Corpus hearing for the six in the High Court on July 22. None of the 31 has been formally charged.

The PSM detainees have been singled out for harsh treatment, including solitary confinement and restricted access to lawyers and families. The six have reportedly been subjected to interrogation for four or five hours a day. Devaraj had to be treated in a cardiac care unit for symptoms that developed while in custody.

Lawyers and activists have ridiculed the charges against the PSM members. Bersih head Ambiga Sreenevasan said that far from the PSM waging war against the king by collecting “men, arms or ammunition” as specified under Section 122 of the Penal Code, the party’s aim was to present a petition to the king calling for electoral reform.

Others pointed out that all the T-shirts seized were on sale in markets throughout Malaysia and that the Home Affairs Ministry had approved the PSM’s registration as a legal political party in June 2008. Nothing had changed in the party’s literature during the ensuing two years.

While the detention of PSM members must be opposed, this crackdown on the PSM has nothing to do with the party being “communist” or “socialist.” The party’s program is a modest list of reforms that it seeks to achieve within the framework of parliamentary politics and the capitalist system.

Moreover, the PSM plays an insidious role in subordinating workers and young people to the bourgeois opposition Pakatan Rakyat. Devaraj won his seat in the 2008 election not through an independent election campaign, but rather as part of the Pakatan Rakyat. In doing so, the PSM fostered the dangerous illusion that Pakatan Rakyat and its leader Anwar Ibrahim represented a progressive alternative to the ruling coalition led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

The PSM was formed in 1998, with the stated aim of filling a political gap after the Malaysian Peoples Socialist Party had dropped the term “socialist” in 1990 and subsequently merged with Anwar’s Peoples Justice Party. The PSM’s website declares that the party “filled a vacuum in the country’s left politics” and supposedly introduced a “different brand of politics.”

Although the PSM is not formally part of Pakatan Rakyat, it orbits around the bourgeois opposition, which is committed to a program of pro-market restructuring. Anwar’s opposition to UMNO’s communal Malay supremacist politics is not based on a commitment to basic democratic rights, but instead regards the UMNO policy as a barrier to economic expansion and attracting foreign investment.

The PSM is quite explicit in its subordination of workers to Pakatan Rakyat, declaring: “While civil and political protests are carried out by the mainstream political parties, PSM continues to support and organise pickets, strikes and demonstrations among the working class.” In other words, while agitating on limited economic issues among workers, the party leaves politics to the “mainstream political parties.”

The fact that the government has made a scapegoat out of the PSM and launched a communist scare campaign reflects deeper fears in Malaysia’s ruling circles of growing social tensions and the potential for widespread political unrest. Already the business elite is demanding further “reforms,” including the implementation of a goods and services tax, an end to fuel subsidies and price hikes for electricity—measures that could provoke a backlash from working people.



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