

Australian intelligence agencies prepare for political upheaval

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Alarmed by the “Arab Spring”—the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt that last year ushered in a new period of class struggle internationally—Australia’s six civilian and military intelligence agencies are preparing for unpredictable political upheavals, abroad and at home.

An official review of the “Australian Intelligence Community”, released last month, warned the Gillard government that the events of 2011 had revealed how difficult it was for intelligence agencies to anticipate the collapse of seemingly stable social and political orders. “With such fragility, it will be unknowable what exactly will tip the system over the edge, as we saw very clearly with events such as the Arab Spring,” the report stated.

The review shed light on the build up of the agencies’ resources and powers since 2001. It reported, for the first time, that their combined budget had more than trebled from \$317 million in 2000 to \$1.07 billion in 2010—a compound annual growth rate of 14.6 percent a year.

Also reported was a qualitative transformation, involving a more aggressive and broad-ranging role. According to the report, this involved the intelligence agencies supporting “substantial security and military operations at home and abroad,” equipped with “new laws and expanded powers, a rapid growth in human and financial resources and a new national security infrastructure.”

Commissioned by the Gillard government in late 2010, the report praised the Labor government’s record in retaining and bolstering the security apparatus erected since 2001 under the previous Howard Liberal government. It claimed that “bipartisan support” in parliament had ensured there was no “substantial criticism” of the controversial anti-terrorism laws.

These laws define terrorism in such sweeping terms that it can cover many forms of political dissent and protest. They expand the surveillance and computer-hacking powers of the security forces, provide for semi-secret trials and erode fundamental legal principles, such as habeas corpus (no detention without trial), the right to silence and the presumption of innocence.

The document pointed to the underlying purpose of this vast expansion of powers and resources. While largely conducted in the name of combating terrorism, the build-up has been increasingly focussed on dealing with signs of social and political discontent at home, as well as mounting geo-strategic tensions in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.

The report emphasised the Labor government’s shift to an “all hazards” approach, concentrating on all the supposed threats to national security, not just terrorism. This doctrine emphasises the many rising political and geo-strategic “challenges” confronting the Australian ruling class.

Among the “challenges” acknowledged in the report are “cyber threats to Australian strategic commercial interests”, “failed and fragile states closer to our shores” and the rise of “emerging world powers” in the region, marking the “dawning of the Asian Century”.

Without mentioning China by name, the report pointed to one of the acute contradictions confronting the Australian capitalist class. The economy depends on raw material exports to China, but Australia is strategically aligned with the US, which is aggressively confronting Beijing in the Asian region. The Gillard government has agreed to a greater US military presence in northern Australia, further heightening regional tensions.

“Navigating our international relationships will be one of Australia’s greatest strategic challenges in the

coming decades,” the report stated, while highlighting the intelligence agencies’ intimate relations with their US counterparts.

“As a result of Australia’s joint operations with our allies throughout the 9/11 decade, Australia’s intelligence relationships are at a very high point,” the review reported. Those “overseas partners”, which were thanked for their input into the review, were listed as the US, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand.

The published report is a guardedly-worded unclassified version, purged of any sensitive discussion or details. Generally, it expressed satisfaction with the Australian agencies’ performance. Nevertheless, it urged an improved “priority setting,” assisted by “a more analytic approach that is better aligned with the government’s all hazards approach to national security.”

Similar themes were reflected in a January 24 speech by David Irvine, the director-general of security. He noted the Labor government’s “all hazards” expansion of the ambit of national security “beyond the very traditional concepts of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and protection of the lives of citizens.”

Irvine, who heads the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), specifically warned of “home-grown” threats apart from terrorism, spoke of greater monitoring of the Internet, and indicated deeper infiltration into working class suburbs via the recruitment of more ASIO agents in newly-arrived immigrant communities.

Irvine dwelt on forging closer relations with the corporate sector to develop “national cyber expertise”. One major cyber threat he nominated was foreign espionage, a practice he specifically associated with China. He also railed against “cyber attacks against national institutions or important elements of the commercial sector, such as the banks on whom we depend for our daily commerce ... as a means of expressing protest.”

Irvine’s emphasis on working with large corporations to monitor and combat what he called “a malicious by-product of the information technology age” has ominous implications for freedom of expression on the Internet.

It was Irvine’s tenth public statement since last April, an unprecedented series of appearances for the ASIO

head, customarily a secretive and reclusive post. Last September, Irvine gave another indication of the deep concerns in ruling circles over the economic and political prospects. He catalogued an “endless” list of security dangers “swirling around us”, including “groundswells of change in the ‘Arab Spring’”, “economic shocks closer to home,” “unprecedented riots and lawlessness in the UK” and “the way the world will react to international debt crises.”

For all the Labor government’s claims that the Australian economy is relatively shielded from the renewed global financial turmoil, there is palpable anxiety within the security establishment about the political impact of mounting job cuts, glaring inequality and worsening social distress, leading to stepped-up surveillance and preparations for state repression.



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