

Police attack large opposition rally in Malaysia

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Malaysian police used tear gas and water-cannon laced with chemicals to attack a large opposition rally in the capital Kuala Lumpur last Saturday demanding election reform. The demonstration points to rising social and political tensions as the global economic crisis impacts on Malaysia.

According to national police spokesman Ramil Yoosuf, the rally, called by Bersih (Clean and Fair Elections), numbered 50,000 at its peak. Rally organisers insisted that many more attended, but even the police figure makes the rally the country's largest demonstration since the 1998 "Reformasi" protests.

There were more than 500 arrests on Saturday. Police said those detained were all released, but some could be charged with offences. Home Affairs Minister Hisamuddeen Hussain blamed the street battles on the demonstrators. He claimed the police acted with restraint and a "group of protestors tried to provoke a violent confrontation with the police."

However, it was evident that the authorities had been preparing for a confrontation. City authorities denied the protest organisers the right to rally at the Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) and police refused requests to assist the organisers in crowd management. Police obtained a magistrate's order on April 27 barring Bersih from the square and its immediate environs and barricaded the area.

Organisers led the thousands of protestors to the edge of the barricade at 2 p.m. on Saturday for a sit-down protest. At 2:30 p.m., Ambiga Sreenevasan of Bersih and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim declared the rally had achieved its purpose and called on participants to disperse.

Most protestors ignored the rally leaders and stayed put. At 3 p.m. a small group breached the police barricade. The police responded by tear gassing the group and also peaceful crowds who were nowhere near the incident. Malaysia's Bar

Council, which had 80 monitors at the scene, stated that the police attacked in such a way that it prevented people from leaving the area. Its team reported cases of police brutality, including assaults on those arrested.

Police set up road blocks and closed down train services to the area, trapping many. The attacks continued until 7 p.m. Journalists were among those targeted. One Al Jazeera camera team had their equipment smashed as police yelled "no media, no media." National Union of Journalists secretary V. Anbalagan issued a statement on Sunday asking: "Media workers could be identified by their press tags. So, why were they targeted yesterday?"

Bersih advances limited demands for electoral reform. These include a cleanup of the electoral rolls, the resignation of current Election Commission members and the establishment of an independent electoral regulation body, for the upcoming elections to be monitored by international observers, access by opposition parties to the government-controlled mass media, and a minimum three-week campaign period.

However, even these demands constitute a political threat to the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which has held office continuously since formal independence in 1957. UMNO is notorious for its police state methods. It exerts political influence over the entire state apparatus, including the courts, tightly regulates the media and has not hesitated to use draconian security legislation to arbitrarily jail opponents.

UMNO's ruthless methods were demonstrated in the course of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad dismissed Anwar as deputy leader and finance minister and expelled him and his supporters from the party. He was badly beaten by the country's police chief then tried and convicted on trumped up charges of corruption and sexual misconduct.

What Mahathir bitterly opposed was Anwar's advocacy of the International Monetary Fund's demand that the government take steps to open Malaysia to foreign investment. UMNO is closely allied to ethnic Malay businesses that have profited through government protection and assistance. Anwar spoke for the interests of more globally-oriented sections of the country's corporate elite.

In the last national elections in March 2008, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) suffered a significant setback, losing its longstanding two-thirds majority and thus its ability to change the constitution at will. The ruling coalition also lost control of five of Malaysia's thirteen states.

In the wake of the election, new charges of sodomy were brought against Anwar in a bid to undermine the opposition parties. Anwar was, however, acquitted earlier this year. The acquittal itself was unusual, pointing to sharp divisions in the country's ruling elite.

The government's reaction to last Saturday's protest indicates real fears that it might lose the next election. Prime Minister Najib Razak slammed the demonstrations declaring they were seeking to present a negative picture of the government internationally. The government-controlled media declared that the protestors were aiming at "regime change."

Bersih is made up of dozens of non-government organisations and has the support of the three main parties in the opposition People's Alliance coalition—Anwar's People's Justice Party (Keadilan), the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party, and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). Saturday's mass rally was Bersih's third and largest event, following demonstrations in November 2007 and July 2011.

The protest may cause Najib to reconsider his plans for an early election this year. He has already taken a number of largely cosmetic steps to try to blunt popular opposition to the government's anti-democratic methods and to the country's deepening social divide.

Following last year's protest, Najib set up a parliamentary committee to review Malaysia's electoral laws. The committee issued 22 recommendations, including tightening the electoral roll, a more independent Election Commission, and increasing the campaign period from 7 to 10 days. Parliament adopted the recommendations on April 3, but the opposition has criticised them as inadequate and lacking

detail.

Najib has announced policies to undercut Anwar's support among layers of business. He has taken tentative steps to encourage greater foreign investment by modifying laws that favoured ethnic Malay businesses and restricted the operations of foreign capital.

The government has also taken several steps to ameliorate the social crisis confronting working people. In the budget last November, Najib allocated \$US10.6 billion to maintaining fuel and food subsidies for 2012. The measure is particularly aimed at rural areas, which account for two-thirds of parliamentary seats.

Earlier this week, the government also announced the country's first ever minimum wage laws that set pay at 900 ringgit (\$US300) a month for peninsula Malaysia and 800 ringgit for the Borneo states. These wages, if implemented, would lift workers just above the current poverty level of 763 ringgit a month.

The government's preparations for an early election appear to be driven by fears that the Malaysian economy is slowing. Growth forecasts have already fallen this year from 5-6 percent to 4-5 percent.

Last weekend's protest calling for electoral reform is a reflection of broader dissatisfaction with the government over declining living standards and social distress. The ruthless way in which the police suppressed the demonstration underscores the cosmetic character of Najib's posturing as a democratic reformer and his government's inability to tolerate even limited opposition and dissent.



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