

Australia police raids stir up new “terror” scare

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Just a day after the anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, federal and state police carried out the largest “anti-terror” raids in Australia since 2009. The media immediately seized on the police operation to raise the spectre of “home-grown terrorism”.

Last Wednesday scores of Australian Federal Police and Victoria Police officers took part in dawn raids of houses and shopfronts at 11 locations across suburban Melbourne. Witnesses said at least 50 police surrounded the Al-Furqan Centre, a suburban Islamic information centre.

Yet, despite the heavily-publicised raids—the media was tipped off in advance—only one man was apparently sought and arrested. Adnan Karabegovic, 24, faces four charges of collecting documents “being connected with preparation for, the engagement of a person in, or assistance in a terrorist act.” There was no suggestion of any actual terrorist plot, just the possession of Jihadist literature.

The charges relate to four editions of *Inspire* magazine—an English language online magazine alleged to be published by the organisation Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Simply for possessing them, Karabegovic could be jailed for up to 15 years. He was denied bail until the next court mention of his case, due on December 6.

These charges illustrate the far-reaching, anti-democratic character of the post-2002 “anti-terrorism” laws. They permit convictions and lengthy jail terms for merely collecting documents that allegedly have an unspecified “connection” to terrorism, without evidence of any specific terrorist act or planning. Terrorism itself is defined in sweeping terms that can cover many forms of political protest.

Last month, the High Court, Australia’s supreme

court, delivered a ruling that underscored how far these provisions threaten freedom of expression. The judges dismissed an appeal by Belal Khazaal against his jailing for 12 years for “making a document connected with a terrorist act.” The court said the charges required no intent to encourage terrorism. Instead the legislation requires defendants to prove lack of intention—effectively reversing the centuries-old “mens rea” principle that the prosecution must prove a guilty mind.

In an effort to justify the latest raids, the police and the media reported that firearms and imitation guns were seized during the raids, along with computer equipment and “extremist material.” Yet, the police admitted that the firearms were registered and that no imminent terrorist threat had been identified.

No explanation was provided as to why such large-scale raids were necessary, given the lack of any immediate threat. The raids bore all the hallmarks of previous police operations, all designed to raise public alarm about supposed terrorist threats. “Australians were again reminded that terrorism remains a potent threat on our shores,” an *Australian* editorial declared.

The timing of the operation points to the same methodology as that of the former Howard government, which used the 9/11 attacks in the US, the 2002 Bali bombings and its own terror scare in 2005 to push through counter-terrorism laws that overturned basic legal and democratic rights such as no detention without trial.

After the last such raids in 2009, based on sensational claims of an improbable plot to attack a Sydney army barracks, the Labor government unveiled a package of measures to further toughen the anti-terrorism laws. Key amendments extended an “urging violence” offence, expanded police search powers, allowed the

prosecution to appeal against the granting of bail to terrorism suspects, and streamlined secrecy measures for semi-public trials.

Various media reports claimed that the timing of last week's raids was determined by the fact that members of the Islamic group targeted by police had discovered that they had been infiltrated by an undercover Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) agent. The fact that an ASIO operative had surreptitiously joined the group only raises further questions.

In at least three previous high-profile terrorist trials, including after the 2009 raids, evidence soon emerged that ASIO spies had acted as provocateurs, inciting targeted groups to take actions or make statements that could be exploited to lay terrorism charges. In the current case, the Al-Furqan Centre group had reportedly been under ASIO surveillance for years, without any evidence being produced of any terrorist plot or planning.

Moreover, the infiltration points to Labor's ongoing expansion of ASIO's operations against political groups, under the guise of the "war on terrorism." While slashing social spending, the Labor government has continued to pour resources into the political spy agency, which has more than trebled in size since 2002.

The night after the raids, Attorney-General Nicola Roxon went on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program to praise the police operation. She declared that despite there being "no immediate risk," the "police have uncovered people with a serious intent to cause harm" and "use that material [the magazine articles] in some way for a violent or terrorist act."

In making these comments Roxon blatantly flouted basic legal norms, including the sub judice rule against publicly declaring the guilt of a person under criminal prosecution. Roxon strenuously defended the tenuous charges against Karabegovic, insisting that criminal liability had to be extended to "all sorts of steps" supposedly in preparation for terrorism.

Just last month, Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a review of amendments passed in 2005, with Labor's support, that introduced so-called preventative detention and other draconian provisions. As with the previous reviews of the terror laws conducted by Labor since 2007, this review's purpose

is to further boost, not limit, the measures (see: "Australian government prepares to bolster terrorism laws").

One month earlier, in July, Roxon released a discussion paper pushing for unprecedented powers for the government to monitor all Internet communications. Everything that Australian residents do on-line, from Skype calls to Twitter and Facebook posts, would be stored for up to two years for the use of the security agencies (see: "Australian government proposes sweeping Internet surveillance").

Islamic fundamentalists provide a convenient pretext for the imposition of these measures, whose wider purpose is to prepare for rising political disaffection as the global economic crisis deepens.

The latest police operation comes as the bogus character of the "war on terror" becomes increasingly evident. From the outset, the "war" was a cover for wars of aggression abroad, starting with Afghanistan and Iraq, and for police-state measures at home. Now, the US and its allies are backing Islamist and Al Qaeda-linked groups as part of its regime-change operation in Syria, as it did in Libya. Significantly, the allegedly "terrorist" material on the *Inspire* magazine web site includes videos of Islamist militias fighting in Syria.

Many unanswered questions remain about last week's huge police operation. But all the indications are that its timing is bound up with the fact that the Labor government, and the entire political establishment, is facing mounting popular discontent as economic conditions deteriorate. The renewed terrorist scare campaign is a diversion from the escalating austerity offensive on jobs, working conditions and social services, and a pretext for the further expansion of police and surveillance powers.



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