

Malaysia excludes Australian senator in lead up to election

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The refusal of Malaysian immigration authorities to allow the entry of Australian senator Nick Xenophon last month indicates a distinct nervousness in the Barisan Nasional (BN) government in the run up to national elections in Malaysia, due to be held by June.

Xenophon, an independent, was denied entry at Kuala Lumpur on February 16 on security grounds. He was detained in a holding area and put back on a plane for Australia the same day. He was part of an Australian parliamentary delegation that had planned to meet with a range of politicians, including opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, as well as a government minister.

The pretext for Xenophon's expulsion was his role as an observer at a 50,000-strong protest rally in Kuala Lumpur last April, called by the electoral reform group "Clean and Fair Elections" (Bersih). Xenophon criticised the heavy-handed methods used by police against the demonstrators. Commenting on his expulsion, Bersih leader Ambiga Sreenevasan said it underscored "the paranoia of the authorities about our elections".

Malaysia's decision to bar entry to a serving Australian parliamentarian is unprecedented and indicates considerable sensitivity on the part of Prime Minister Najib Razak to any criticism of his government or the election. Najib's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant party in the BN coalition, has ruled the country since independence from Britain in 1957; but its autocratic grip on power is slipping.

Najib was installed as UMNO leader and prime minister in April 2009 to try to reverse its setback at the previous election in March 2008. Anwar's Peoples Alliance (PR) won 82 seats in the 222-seat parliament, up from 19 previously. As a result, BN lost the two-thirds majority needed for constitutional changes,

which it has used in the past to shore up its rule and implement policies that discriminate in favour of ethnic Malays.

In addition, the opposition won power in four of the country's 13 states—Penang, Selangor, Perak and Kedah—and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which is part of the opposition coalition, retained Kelantan. The four states gained by the opposition constitute the economic hub of Malaysia, producing 56 percent of gross domestic product, pointing to an underlying political shift against the government.

Najib has pursued an aggressive strategy policy of political skulduggery, vote buying and political manoeuvring, aimed at undermining the opposition. Charges of sodomy against Anwar have been revived, despite the Federal Court's 2004 overturn of his 1998 conviction. Anwar was charged again in 2008, tried and finally acquitted in January 2012 in a second frame-up case.

The government is targeting Anwar because he is the linchpin of the unstable opposition PR coalition, which includes PAS, along with Anwar's Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). UNMO leaders have sought to exacerbate differences between the secular, ethnic Chinese-based DAP and PAS, which advocates an Islamic state. UMNO intrigues in 2009 overturned PR's control of the Perak state government.

At the same time, Najib has attempted to portray himself as a reformer by adapting to the opposition's program of pro-market restructuring, ending pro-Malay discrimination and easing the country's police-state laws. The government has watered down the laws protecting Malay businesses and encouraged foreign investment. Najib has made cosmetic changes to the country's draconian security laws, which provide for

detention without trial.

For two years in a row, the BN government has given cash handouts to the country's poorest households and made other concessions to counter opposition criticism that only the wealthy Malay elite has benefitted from decades of BN rule.

After five years, however, the opposition coalition remains intact and still holds power in four states. It has won several by-elections, boosting its parliamentary seats to 86. The country's limited opinion polling is predicting a tight race.

The political tide is shifting against UMNO and its conservative partners. Powerful sections of Malaysia's corporate elite are increasingly frustrated at the government's failure to implement pro-market restructuring, attract more foreign investment and dismantle the pro-Malay discrimination that benefits UMNO cronies.

These concerns in business circles have only deepened as the global economic crisis has worsened, affecting export markets in the US, Europe and Japan.

Layers of the ruling elite are backing Anwar, who in 1998 was deputy prime minister and finance minister in Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's government during the Asian financial crisis. Mahathir bitterly opposed Anwar's attempts to implement the International Monetary Fund's drastic restructuring measures, expelled him from UMNO and arrested him on trumped-up charges.

Najib is particularly concerned over the opposition's appeal to youth who are hostile to the government's anti-democratic methods. Young people treat the pro-government press with contempt, preferring to rely on the Internet and social media, which are undermining UMNO's media monopoly.

In a ham-fisted attempt to drum up the youth vote, BN invited the popular South Korean gangnam musician Psy to perform at a concert in Penang on February 11. In what was meant to be a political highlight, Najib attempted to rouse the audience with, "Are you ready for Psy?" to which he got a resounding "Yes." But when he switched to, "Are you ready for the BN?" the youthful audience yelled "No," which only got louder when he repeated the question. The embarrassing episode quickly spread over the Internet.

The opposition launched its election campaign last week, promising tighter anti-corruption laws, a 2 billion

ringgit (\$US600 million) fund to increase the minimum wage and an end to "obsolete" policies discriminating in favour of ethnic Malays. The PR is also stirring up reactionary anti-foreigner sentiment, saying it will create jobs by reducing the number of low-paid foreign workers.

Xenophon's exclusion underscores the Malaysian government's reluctance to allow foreign election monitors to observe the poll. UMNO will use its control of the government apparatus and the mainstream media to influence voters. It also relies on a heavy gerrymander in favour of rural areas, as well as other more underhanded methods, to rig the election result. The last thing that Najib wants is international scrutiny of the election.



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