

Large opposition rally against Malaysian election result

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The opposition People's Alliance (PR) in Malaysia launched a campaign yesterday to challenge the result of Sunday's election, denouncing it as fraudulent. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim vowed on Tuesday to lead a "fierce movement to clean this country from election malpractices and fraud."

Between 50,000 and 80,000 people, many dressed in black, defied police threats of arrest to attend the first opposition rally last night at the Kelana Jaya stadium, just outside the capital Kuala Lumpur. Anwar told supporters: "This is the beginning of a battle between the people and an illegitimate, corrupt and arrogant government."

Police banned the rally, saying the PR had not applied for a permit. The opposition insisted that permission was not required for a rally at a "designated place of assembly." In the event, the government, which has a long history of violent crackdowns on protests, backed away from an immediate confrontation.

There is widespread anger among opposition supporters over the election result. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition secured only 47 percent of the overall vote, yet won 133 seats—57 percent of seats in the 222-seat national parliament. The opposition gained just over 50 percent of the vote, but only 89 seats.

The election outcome is a product of a systematic gerrymander in favour of the rural ethnic Malay base of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the main BN partner. Over half the seats won by BN came from only three of the country's 13 states, the largely rural Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo, and Johor near Singapore.

Opposition support was strong in urban areas, particularly among sections of the middle class. Ethnic Chinese and Indians, who comprise about 40 percent of the population, also deserted the government in droves.

UMNO-led governments have systematically discriminated against the country's minorities in favour of ethnic Malays, including in government jobs, education and business.

The opposition has alleged that the government was involved in widespread vote buying, ballot stuffing and the transporting of voters to key marginal electorates. After more than half a century in power, UMNO also has a stranglehold over the main media and the state apparatus.

Prime Minister Najib Razak has flatly denied any electoral malpractice and disputed the findings of two Malaysian think tanks that the election was "only partially free and not fair." The think tanks' timid report was co-funded by the Election Commission, the British and Canadian High Commissions in Kuala Lumpur and several non-government organisations. The report raised concerns about the independence of the Election Commission, which functions as part of the prime minister's office.

PR leader Anwar postured through the election as a defender of democracy, and opponent of corruption and racial discrimination. The PR, however, is seeking to exploit the hostility of wide layers of the population, especially young people, toward BN's autocratic rule in order to drive through a pro-market agenda of restructuring designed to further open up the country to foreign investors.

Anwar was deputy prime minister and finance minister in the BN government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Amid the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, Anwar advocated the International Monetary Fund's harsh restructuring measures and came into conflict with Mahathir, who was determined to protect UMNO's business cronies.

Anwar was expelled from UMNO, jailed and

convicted on two trumped-up charges, then released in 2004 after one of the charges was overturned. Anwar formed his own party, the People's Justice Party (Keadilan), which later forged an unlikely alliance with the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), and made significant advances in the 2008 election.

Anwar's challenge to last Sunday's election result is not pitched at working people but at sections of the country's corporate elite. He is, above all, seeking support from the US and its allies, which have sponsored a series of phony colour "revolutions" and, in the case of Syria and Libya, civil wars, to install pro-American regimes.

Despite the invocation of "people's power" at yesterday's rally, Anwar is determined to keep his "fierce movement" for "reform" firmly under the PR's grip and within the framework of parliamentary politics. The main thrust of Anwar's challenge is through the courts, where PR is seeking rulings in 30 constituencies for fresh elections.

Unlike 1998, when he received significant backing from the US, Anwar has secured little or no support from Washington and its partners for overturning the election result. An initial indication came from Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr, who on Monday welcomed the election outcome and refused to comment on allegations of fraud, as these were the "internal affairs of Malaysia." In the same interview, he had no qualms about intervening in the internal affairs of Syria, and again supported the US call for regime change.

Carr was echoing the line from Washington. Yesterday as the opposition prepared for its rally, White House spokesman Jay Carney congratulated Najib on his victory and expressed the Obama administration's willingness to work with the new government. Carney "noted" concerns about electoral irregularities, but simply called on Malaysian authorities to investigate.

Unlike Syria, Obama is quite willing to work with the Malaysia's autocratic regime because it serves the interests of US imperialism. As the Obama administration has ratcheted up its aggressive "pivot to Asia," directed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region, the Najib government has fallen into line, developing closer political and military ties

with the US.

The Washington-based Brookings Institute spelled out its appreciation for Najib's shift in an article last week entitled, "An American perspective on Malaysia's elections." It commented: "Under Mahathir, opposition to perceived residual Western colonialism was a rallying cry and a frequent and increasingly anachronistic theme. His successor, Abdullah Badawi, was less shrill but did not move significantly away from Mahathir's policies. Najib has fundamentally repositioned Malaysia internationally. He has moved away from the old UMNO policy seeking to divide Asia from the United States and has seen the United States as an important partner for Malaysia and ASEAN."

The article praised Najib's commitment to the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership, through which Washington is seeking to form a trade bloc against China. It noted approvingly: "Defence cooperation with the United States and others has been normalised and it has not remained a forum for grandstanding against the West."

The political situation in Malaysia remains highly volatile, as both the government and opposition are aware. Neither coalition is able to meet the aspirations of working people for democratic rights and decent living standards. These needs will be realised only through the independent mobilisation of the working class, at the head of the rural masses, on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective. That requires the building of a Malaysian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, as the revolutionary leadership needed to wage such a political struggle.



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