

Malaysian opposition stages more mass protest rallies

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Malaysia's opposition Peoples Alliance (PR) coalition held further large rallies over the weekend to protest the alleged rigging of the May 5 election by the government of Prime Minister Najib Razak.

On Saturday night, an estimated 150,000 people gathered in and around a stadium at Batu Kawan in northern mainland Penang, marking the largest of the opposition's rallies held to date. On Sunday, another rally—reported in the *Malaysian Chronicle* web site as 100,000 strong—was staged in Ipoh, a city in Perak state, about 200 kilometres north of Kuala Lumpur. More rallies are scheduled this week in Pahang and Johor states.

According to local reports, the protests have largely consisted of young people, of different racial backgrounds. There is widespread anger over the election outcome, especially in the urbanised western part of peninsular Malaysia.

Razak's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the largest component of the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, has claimed the right to extend its 56-year term in office after BN received 133 seats in the national parliament, despite officially winning just 47 percent of the vote. The PR, led by Anwar Ibrahim, obtained 51 percent, but secured only 89 seats due to electoral gerrymanders. The opposition has alleged widespread ballot fraud.

The PR leadership is nevertheless moving to defuse tensions and avoid triggering a confrontation with the government. There was a notable shift in rhetoric at the weekend rallies, away from the opposition's initial post-election refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the ballot. Now the focus appears to be on reforming the country's electoral system.

At the Penang rally on Saturday, Anwar was joined by other leaders from the PR's three constituent

parties—Anwar's Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan), the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). Anwar claimed that PR had been denied victory by “the mother of all frauds”. However, Anwar's previous reference to the “battle between the people and an illegitimate, corrupt and arrogant government” was defined more cautiously, as a fight to get “answers” from the government and the election commission about electoral fraud.

Addressing the government in his speech, Anwar declared: “You have cheated us before but we have forgiven you. But this time no. We demand an answer. You better give us an answer now.”

An Agence France-Presse (AFP) report noted that Anwar's speech indicated that “the opposition would focus less on challenging the result and more on exposing pro-government biases in the electoral system.”

Anwar's manoeuvring reflects his failure to secure the support of US imperialism and other major powers for his campaign against the government. Anwar, previously deputy prime minister and finance minister in the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, had enjoyed US support during the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. He advocated International Monetary Fund austerity and restructuring measures and came into conflict with Mahathir and the established patronage network around UMNO's corporate cronies. Resting on layers of Malaysia's corporate elite, Anwar is now looking for Washington's backing, along the lines of the US role in instigating phony colour “revolutions” during the past decade in eastern Europe and former Soviet states.

This has fallen flat. Shortly after the election result was announced, White House spokesman Jay Carney

expressed the Obama administration's willingness to work with the Najib government and dismissed concerns over election irregularities as an internal matter. Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr, Washington's point man in the region, similarly refused to comment on Malaysia's "internal affairs". Unsurprisingly, the Western media has fallen in line and dropped virtually all coverage of the political crisis.

Since Najib's installation in 2009, he has consciously sought to improve relations with the US, above all by collaborating with the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot" to East Asia and the Pacific, aimed at militarily and strategically encircling China. The Malaysian government has also backed Obama's Trans Pacific Partnership, a trade bloc directed against Beijing.

A November 2012 report on US-Malaysian relations published by the Singapore-based S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies noted that Najib's line up behind Obama reflected "a political calculation by the governing elite to capitalise on the increasingly warm and close bilateral ties as a leverage to reduce—if not neutralise—Washington's support for the Anwar Ibrahim-led opposition and civil society movements, which have presented a growing challenge to the ruling BN coalition."

This strategy appears to have paid off. Nevertheless, the political situation is very unstable and could change rapidly, in turn triggering a shift in Washington's orientation.

Electoral data released this week shows that the ruling parties have lost much of their support among urban middle class ethnic Malays. In Kuala Lumpur, the PR opposition won 9 out of the 11 seats available, and came close to winning the other two, even with evidence indicating that the government had rigged the electoral rolls.

Anwar and the opposition are determined to prevent the emergence of a genuine mass movement against the government. They fear, above all, that such a development could quickly spiral out of control and see the working class begin to advance its own independent demands. From the beginning of the election protest campaign, Anwar insisted that the result could be challenged through the courts—despite UMNO's tight control over the judiciary and the entire state apparatus.

Anwar represents a faction of the ruling elite that

opposes UMNO's traditional cronyism and protectionist measures favouring ethnic Malay-owned corporations and seeks to further open up the economy to foreign investment. Najib has made certain reforms to the old system, but sections of international finance capital remain dissatisfied. If Anwar did succeed in his drive to become prime minister, he would spearhead a far-reaching austerity and restructuring agenda directed against the living standards of the working class—which is why he is so concerned not to challenge the legitimacy of the repressive state apparatus.



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