# Malaysian government arrests opposition protest leaders

**John Roberts**
**31 May 2013**

The US-backed Malaysian government has begun to crack down on the Anwar Ibrahim-led opposition, which is continuing to organise rallies challenging the legitimacy of the national election held on May 5. Police have arrested at least 20 people and seized thousands of copies of opposition party newspapers.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government claimed an election victory after securing 60 percent of the seats in the national parliament, despite winning just 47 percent of the overall vote, against the opposition's 51 percent. As well as opposing the gerrymandered electoral system, the People's Alliance (PR) opposition coalition accuses the ruling parties of organised ballot stuffing and other fraud in several seats. Anwar and the PR have organised mass rallies in sports stadiums across the country, which they claim have involved a total of 500,000 people.

The police roundup began on May 23. Authorities used the notorious colonial-era 1949 Sedition Act to arrest and charge well-known student activist Adam Adli. Also detained under the Act for investigation were Tian Chua, deputy leader of Anwar's People's Justice Party (Keadilan), Tamrin Ghafar, a member of Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), and Haris Ibrahim, an activist lawyer and president of the Malaysian Civil Liberties Movement. PAS, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Anwar's Keadilan form the PR coalition.

Sedition carries a potential three-year prison sentence. The arrested opposition figures were initially released on bail after being detained, when sessions judges refused police request for remand in custody.

Last Saturday, two days after the arrests, PR supporters held a 60,000-strong rally on a field near a shopping mall just outside of the capital Kuala Lumpur.

Home Minister Zahid Hamidi denounced the rally as illegal and a "provocation." The government and police then stepped up the repressive measures. On Monday, five PR officials were arrested under the 2012 Peaceful Assemblies Act, supposedly for failing to provide 10 days' notice of various opposition rallies held earlier this month. The law carries a maximum fine of 10,000 Malaysian ringgit ($US3,260), which is enough to bar any parliamentarian convicted from holding office.

On Wednesday, Kuala Lumpur deputy police chief Amar Singh Ishar Singh said that Tian Chua, Tamrin Ghafar, Haris Ibrahim, along with student activist Muhammad Safwan Anang and political activist Hishamuddin Rais, would be charged under Section 4 of the Sedition Act for statements made at a PR rally held on May 13. The Act's sweeping definition of sedition covers any incitement of "disaffection against the administration of justice", or of "ill will and hostility between different races or classes of the population."

Authorities also seized opposition newspapers, including Keadilan's *Suara Keadilan*, PAS's *Harakah*, and the DAP's the *Rocket*.

Adam Adli, the first charged, was accused of urging people onto the streets to bring down the BN government. According to media reports, he actually said, "you cheated in the elections, we go for demonstrations." Anwar and other PR leaders have repeatedly denied that their rallies are aimed at toppling the government.

The opposition coalition represents the interests of a rival faction of the Malaysian ruling elite. Its very cautious protest campaign stems from its fear that an emerging mass movement could spill out of the opposition's control and see the Malaysian working class begin to intervene and raise its own independent demands.

© World Socialist Web Site

"No opposition leader wants the torch to light a conflagration on the streets in the hope of toppling the government in a Malaysian spring," the *Economist* commented.

Anwar previously served as deputy leader to Malaysian autocrat Mahathir Mohamad. He only broke from Mahathir's ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) after the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998, promoting the International Monetary Fund's demands for the restructuring of the Malaysian economy and its opening up to foreign investors. Anwar represents the section of the Malaysian elite that favours "free market" economic reform, regarding UMNO's race-based form of national economic regulation and crony politics as impediments to its interests.

The opposition leader aims to come to power through the existing mechanisms of the Malaysian capitalist state, not by challenging their legitimacy. Last week, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that Anwar had signed a secret pact with Prime Minister Najib Razak before the election, pledging to recognise the outcome of the vote. He has since declared the pact invalid because of the alleged vote rigging. Nevertheless, he has since insisted that opposition rallies are confined to sports stadiums, and do not involve street marches, despite what he described as mounting "frustration" in the opposition's ranks over the limited impact of the demonstrations.

Anwar is looking for support from within ruling circles, especially in the parliament and judiciary.

The PR has appealed to the High Court over alleged fraud, including rigged electoral rolls and illegal voting, in 27 key electorates. The courts previously secured Anwar's freedom, overturning UMNO's efforts to frame him on sodomy charges, illegal in predominantly Muslim Malaysia. In 2004, his first conviction was quashed while a related, equally bogus corruption charge kept him in jail for six years. In January 2012, he was acquitted in a second case. The court decisions reflected UMNO's waning control over the state apparatus and related shifts within the ruling elite, involving growing opposition to the government's economic program.

Anwar is now again looking for support within the courts, while at the same time seeking to split the ruling coalition. Former Prime Minister Mahathir has warned of possible defections from the BN's ranks. UNNO holds only 88 of the 133 BN parliamentary seats, and is dependent on support from minor parties particularly from the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah. After the 2008 election, Anwar unsuccessfully appealed to MPs from these areas to switch sides to change the government.

The Malaysian opposition remains deeply frustrated over its failure to secure US support for its challenge to the election outcome. Anwar previously enjoyed Washington's backing. The Najib government, however, has aligned Malaysian foreign policy with the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia that is aimed at encircling China and maintaining US domination over the region. As a result, Washington has dismissed the allegations of electoral fraud, with President Barack Obama personally congratulating Najib on the outcome. This US support has effectively given the green light for the government to crackdown on the opposition.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**

© World Socialist Web Site