

Malaysian government deepens crackdown on opposition

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Prime Minister Najib Razak's government is intensifying its use of Malaysia's courts to persecute parliamentary opposition figures in a bid to strengthen its grip on power. The ruling coalition only retained power at last year's national election through a gerrymander—it took a majority of seats despite securing less than 50 percent of the vote.

Last Sunday, Keadilan party president Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim won the Kajang state assembly seat in Selangor, one of Malaysia's most economically important states. She secured 59.71 percent of the vote, outpolling the government's Malaysian Chinese Association candidate Chew Mei Fun.

Anwar initially stood for the seat, with the aim of becoming the state's chief minister. On March 7, however, the Court of Appeals overturned his 2012 acquittal on a trumped-up sodomy charge, disqualifying him. The three-judge appeals panel sentenced him to five years' imprisonment, although he remains on bail pending a Federal Court appeal.

On March 11, Karpal Singh, Anwar's lawyer and a leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), was fined 4,000 ringgit (\$US1,250) on a 2009 sedition charge. Like Anwar's conviction, the guilty verdict excludes him from holding public office. Singh, 73 and confined to a wheelchair, has been a member of the national parliament since 2004.

Singh was originally acquitted of the sedition charge in 2010. He was charged under a 1948 British colonial law over a legal opinion he offered in 2009 that a political ruling by Perak state's head could be challenged in court. This was deemed to be insulting the Sultan. As in Anwar's case, the prosecution appealed the acquittal and Singh was duly convicted.

Among the other opposition figures in the

government's sights for sedition charges is Tian Chua, the vice president of Anwar's People's Justice Party (Keadilan). Together with DAP and the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), Keadilan is part of the People's Alliance (PR) parliamentary opposition coalition.

Anwar told the London-based *Financial Times* on March 14 that Prime Minister Najib and other senior figures from the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) were involved in a political conspiracy to prevent him standing in the Kajang by-election. He said his bid to become Selangor's chief minister had rattled the UMNO leadership.

"They were shocked when I made this move because they thought everything had been settled for the next four years (until the next national election in 2018)," Anwar declared. "I'm quite determined and they know this so the only way is to derail it through the courts."

Selangor was wrested from the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government in 2008 as part of an election result that saw the PR coalition end the government's two-third majority in the national parliament, thus depriving it of the ability to change the country's constitution.

UMNO had used this power since independence from Britain in 1957 to shore up its autocratic rule and pervasive control over the state apparatus including the judiciary. UMNO has exploited communal politics to divide the electorate and to secure the support of a section of the Malay ruling elite in league with some ethnic Chinese and Indian business tycoons.

Anwar was finance minister and deputy UMNO leader until he fell out with the party leadership following the 1997–98 Asian economic crisis. His free-market program to fully open up the Malaysian economy to the global conglomerates fell foul of the protectionist wing of the Malay, Chinese and Indian

business and political elite. He was detained and convicted of bogus corruption and sodomy charges.

Since then, Anwar has come to represent other sections of the local elite, sidelined by the UMNO regime and its related business empires. PR's popular support comes from widespread resentment of UMNO's autocratic rule and its race-based politics.

In the 2013 national election, the PR further eroded UMNO's grip on power. It won 52 percent of the vote to the government's 47 percent, but won only 89 seats to the BN coalition's 133.

Najib, however, considered the matter "settled" when massive protests against the election result failed to gain the support of the major global powers, particularly Washington. President Barack Obama personally congratulated Najib, as part of the US push for closer diplomatic and military ties with regimes across the region in its "pivot to Asia" to encircle and undermine China's influence.

Anwar then wound down the anti-government rallies. His perspective remains to convince the Western powers, and the local capitalist elite, that his coalition would be better placed to pursue their interests, amid rising social and political disaffection.

He rhetorically asked his supporters in February, when he began his campaign for the Kajang seat: "Why are BN leaders afraid that I take over Selangor's leadership? Because they know that we will work together with PAS and DAP to become a model of cooperation and if we succeed that in itself will answer the question as to the end of BN rule in Malaysia."

The persecution of opposition leaders has attracted some comment from the European Union, via its foreign affairs head Lady Catherine Ashton, from the United Nations on Singh's case, and from international human rights and jurists' groups. On March 13, Malaysia's Chief Justice Ariffin Zakaria used his appearance at the annual Malaysian Judges Conference to defend the judiciary, insisting that the courts were independent and fair.

Compounding the government's difficulties is the furore surrounding the missing Malaysian Airlines flight 370. There is widespread sentiment, exploited by Anwar, that the government has withheld information and mishandled the crisis.

In response to criticism by Anwar, UMNO's propaganda machine linked the plane's disappearance

with the support of its pilot, Zaharie Ahmad Shah, for the PR opposition. An article first appeared in the UK press suggesting that Zaharie's anger over Anwar's conviction might have been a factor in the incident. The pilot has a family connection to Anwar and could have been in the court when Anwar's guilty verdict was announced.

Anwar branded the slander as "reckless, insensitive ... highly defamatory." He said the rumours were "part of the routine character assassination campaign" against the PR by the government-controlled media. Anwar called for last Sunday's Kajang by-election to be a referendum on the BN government.

This week, Anwar called a press conference to urge the Malaysian Parliament to take a stand against the "abuse" of judicial powers directed against PR leaders, in order to head off popular discontent. "Parliament must be assertive about this ... if not Parliament, where do we raise this concern? Do we go to the courts? Do we go to the streets?"

Anwar has a record of making demagogic appeals to popular discontent, while keeping a lid on the unrest, in order to pitch for ruling class and Western backing. If the opposition came to power, it would be as ruthless as the government in imposing its agenda for pro-market restructuring on the working class.



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