

Australian PM foreshadows ban on Islamist group

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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has revealed the deeply anti-democratic character of his government's "terrorist" legislation. First, in an interview with right-wing radio personality Alan Jones on Wednesday, Abbott signaled a move to outlaw an Islamist group because it "campaigns against Australian values" and "Australian interests."

Yesterday, Abbott stepped up the offensive, denouncing Hizb ut-Tahrir as "an organisation which is very careful to avoid advocating terrorism, but is always making excuses for terrorist organisations." The prime minister declared that this was "un-Australian."

This is a recipe for banning political groups that allegedly "excuse" terrorism—for example by seeking to explain its roots—even if they explicitly oppose terrorism. More broadly, the banner of harming "Australian interests" could cover any opposition to the predatory military and bullying activities of Australian imperialism, in league with the US, around the world.

Abbott told Jones that he was just as "angry and frustrated" as the radio host that no ban had been imposed on "organisations like Hizb ut-Tahrir," which publicly opposes the US-led war in Iraq and Syria, and Australia's involvement in it.

Abbott said the group could be proscribed under laws currently before parliament to make it illegal to "promote terrorism." The prime minister also vowed to use existing immigration powers to stop "hate preachers" getting visas to enter Australia.

These comments are part of a systematic whipping up of anti-Muslim xenophobia by the government and the media, in order to try to divert and split the working class along ethno-religious lines amid a drive to war and deeper austerity. They also demonstrate the capacity of the government's laws to be used against a range of opponents of the renewed imperialist war drive

in the Middle East.

The "Foreign Fighters Bill," the second tranche of the government's barrage of terrorism laws, contains a wide array of draconian provisions that go far beyond the ostensible aim of dealing with the small number of Australian residents allegedly fighting with, or supporting, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other jihadist militias.

One key measure, highlighted by Abbott, will make it a crime for anyone to "advocate" terrorism, even if they are merely "reckless" as to whether any terrorism would occur, and no act of terrorism actually occurs. "Advocating" includes urging, promoting, encouraging or counseling.

The government will also be able to ban, by decree, any group allegedly "advocating" terrorism, and this will automatically make all its members, "informal members" and supporters liable to imprisonment.

Such sweeping legislation could be used against a wide range of organisations. The Muslim Legal Network has pointed out that "promoting terrorism" could apply to condemning Israel or, in the past, supporting the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

In the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir, it is a global organisation espousing a reactionary ideology, the establishment of an Islamic caliphate based on sharia law. But it has a record of opposing, on religious grounds, terrorist acts against civilians. It has also been under close surveillance by the Australian intelligence and police apparatus for more than a decade, without the authorities producing any evidence that it engages in, finances, supports or even incites terrorism.

The Abbott government's assault on freedom of political expression and other fundamental democratic rights is going much further than the earlier Liberal-

National government of John Howard, which moved to outlaw Hizb ut-Tahrir during the first wave of the “war on terror.”

On two occasions, in 2005 and 2007, Philip Ruddock, Howard’s attorney-general, ordered the spy agencies to investigate the group, only to be told that its activities did not breach the terrorism laws rammed through between 2002 and 2005, which banned “incitement” of any terrorist act.

During his radio interview, Jones asked Abbott why his government had not used section 24AA of the Crimes Act against Hizb ut-Tahrir. This makes it an offence to “do any act or thing with intent to overthrow” any government “by force or violence.” Abbott replied: “Well, that’s a very good question Alan,” adding that he would investigate whether the section could be “deployed against [groups] like Hizb ut-Tahrir.”

Again, this provision has the potential to be invoked more broadly against opponents of the ruling elite, including socialists.

Another police-state aspect of the terror laws emerged last week when the Australian Federal Police (AFP) revealed that a man arrested in last month’s massive police raids on homes in Sydney and Brisbane was placed under a preventative detention order (PDO) because he refused to answer questions, exercising his right to silence.

AFP assistant commissioner Neil Gaughan told the parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security, which is conducting a token two-week review of the “Foreign Fighters Bill,” that the PDO, which can last up to 14 days without charge, was imposed after the man stopped cooperating with police. The man was originally arrested under the AFP’s “investigation” powers, which allow people to be detained for up to 8 days without charge.

This is the first official information disclosed about the detention during the raids of three men, who were all released without charge. An indefinite court suppression order remains in place, preventing any public scrutiny of the detentions. Under PDOs, prisoners are held in isolation, without knowing the reasons for their incarceration.

The so-called Foreign Fighters Bill lowers the threshold for police to obtain PDOs. During the parliamentary hearings, Karen Horsfall, the principal

legal officer at the attorney-general’s department, said this change could allow people to be placed on PDOs, removed for questioning, and then placed back in detention.

This revolving door scenario highlights the fact that the AFP and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) have four different methods of holding people without trial, all in violation of the centuries-old principle of *habeas corpus*, which forbids imprisonment except by judicial order.

Almost certainly, as the AFP’s admission indicates, these powers are being exploited more than officially reported, with people being threatened with detention unless they cooperate with the police and ASIO, the domestic spy agency.

Wider use of a further form of arbitrary detention came to light this week. Australian Crime Commission (ACC) chief executive Chris Dawson said his agency had conducted 42 “coercive examinations” on 26 people allegedly linked to terrorism. Like ASIO, the ACC can force people to undergo secret questioning, effectively detaining them incommunicado, unable to alert their families, supporters or the media.

As a number of submissions to the parliamentary committee have pointed out, Australia’s “counter-terrorism” laws already exceed those of the US and the UK in stripping away basic legal and democratic rights, and the planned new measures will go further still.

Just as the Abbott government, backed to the hilt by the Labor Party opposition, has placed Australian troops and war planes at the forefront of the renewed US-led aggression in the Middle East, so has the government, with bipartisan support, brought forward the most far-reaching laws designed to intimidate and persecute opposition to the war drive and the accompanying accelerated austerity program.



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