

Malaysian government retains draconian Sedition Act

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Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak used the general assembly of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in late November to announce that he was reneging on his previous promise to repeal the country's anti-democratic Sedition Act.

The meeting, held in Kuala Lumpur's Putra World Trade Centre, erupted in applause from over 2,700 delegates, who stood to shout "Setuju!" (Agree!) when Najib made the announcement. Preceding meetings of UMNO's youth and women's wings had also made the retention of the Act a key issue.

While the government will use the Act against its political opponents, it is also part of the police-state measures that will be used against the working class.

The Sedition Act was imposed in 1948 under British colonial rule, during the ruthless suppression of an armed rural insurgency spearheaded by the Stalinist Malayan Communist Party. While not defining "sedition," it makes uttering "any seditious words" punishable by five years' imprisonment, and fines and bans any "seditious tendency" that incites hatred or contempt or disaffection "against any ruler or against any government."

UMNO, which has ruled Malaysia since formal independence in 1957, has repeatedly used the Act to jail opponents and critics on spurious charges. In the past year, at least 14 individuals, most associated with the opposition People's Alliance (PR), have been charged on dubious grounds under the Act.

As recently as June 2012, Najib promised to abolish the Act and replace it with a "national harmony" law. In his speech to the UMNO general assembly, Najib made reference to the fact that he abolished the Internal Security Act, which allowed for indefinite detention without trial.

The decision to maintain the Sedition Act was made

at a closed-door meeting between Najib and UMNO officials on November 25. According to senior UMNO figure Paud Zarkashi, Najib told the meeting "Malays will be damned" and "religion will be at stake" if the party loses the next scheduled election in 2018.

The opposition PR, headed by Anwar Ibrahim, made steady electoral gains in the past two national elections. In 2008, it deprived the ruling UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition of its two-thirds parliamentary majority.

That majority had allowed the BN government to amend the constitution at will to reinforce its autocratic rule, maintain electoral gerrymanders and impose communal discrimination in favour of ethnic Malays against the country's substantial Chinese and Indian minorities.

In the 2013 election, the PR won the popular vote, 52 percent to the BN's 47 percent, but the gerrymandered system gave the BN 133 parliamentary seats to the PR's 89.

UMNO's determination to retain the Sedition Act is a clear signal that it intends to hold on to power by any means. Najib told the UMNO assembly that "this Act will not only be maintained, but strengthened." He said there would be at least two additions: a special provision to protect the "sanctity of Islam" and another to provide for action against anyone "who calls for the secession of [the Borneo states] of Sabah and Sarawak."

Both amendments are aimed at undermining political opposition to the government. The first provision on Islam is aimed at shoring up UMNO's base of support among the rural Malay population and also driving a wedge into the opposition coalition. PR is composed of Anwar's secular Malay-based Keadilan party, the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP)

and the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS).

Tensions already exist between PAS, which has imposed its version of Islamic law in states under its control, and DAP in particular, which is opposed to such measures. The amendment would turn the Sedition Act into a quasi-religious law that could be used against opposition leaders and to exacerbate internal divisions.

The amendment relating to Sabah and Sarawak reflects UMNO's fears that it is losing ground in the two key states that could tip the balance in parliament. Discontent has grown sharply in what are two of Malaysia's poorest states.

On November 14, the Najib government declared the Sarawak Association for People's Aspiration (Sapa) illegal for "carrying out activities detrimental to the interests of the security of Malaysia and public order in the country."

Sapa leaders insist their aim is not succession, but more autonomy as provided under the 1963 Malaysia Agreement. An Internet survey being conducted by Sapa claims that 90 percent of respondents in Sabah want to leave the Malaysian Federation.

The local elites in the Borneo states have long-standing grievances that the central government takes most of the oil revenues and spends little on local infrastructure; that most civil service jobs are held by non-Borneo officials, effectively overturning of the immigration powers of the state governments; and that UMNO is waging an "Islamisation" campaign.

The Sedition Act will be directed at opposition parties in the first instance. However, it is also being retained to suppress rising discontent among working people as the economy slows.

The Malaysian Human Development Report 2013 showed that 53 percent of the population had nil financial assets, with the figure rising to 63 percent in rural households. The low wages of the majority of workers explain why 90 percent of those nearing retirement do not have enough funds to maintain even a basic lifestyle for more than five years, according to the Employees Provident Fund data.

Social tensions will be compounded by the government's measures to rein in the budget deficit from 3 percent to 1 percent of gross domestic product. It has implemented "structural reforms" that will abolish \$US5.97 billion in petrol and diesel subsidies

from December 1 and introduce a goods and services tax of 6 percent from next April.

The country's economy is slowing, down to growth of 5.6 percent in the third quarter from 6.4 percent in the previous quarter. Exports of oil, rubber and palm oil are being hammered by falling international commodity prices. Malaysia's currency, the ringgit, hit a five-year low against the US dollar on Monday.

The PR opposition does not oppose the government's austerity agenda. While it won support in the last election because of popular hostility to BN's autocratic rule, Anwar was expelled from UMNO in 1998 precisely because he championed the International Monetary Fund's demands for the type of pro-market restructuring now underway.



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