

Latest Australian “terrorism” arrests set dangerous precedents

Mike Head
16 August 2016

Two arrests in recent weeks have highlighted the capacity of Australia’s ever-expanding “anti-terrorism” laws to be used far beyond the main current targets—vulnerable boys and young men, supposedly linked to Islamist extremists in the Middle East.

Last week, Phillip Galea, 31, described by the media as a right-wing extremist, was arrested during a series of house raids across Melbourne in a joint operation by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Victoria state police. He reportedly suffered injuries after police fired a stun grenade and dragged him through a broken glass window.

Galea was charged with collecting or making documents likely to facilitate a terrorism act and planning or preparing for a terrorist act. The police provided no details of these vague charges and released no evidence, except to say they bugged Galea’s phone for eight months.

The highly-publicised character of the arrest, and the speed with which Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s Liberal-National Coalition government claimed credit, point to definite political calculations.

Justice Minister Michael Keenan emphasised that it was the first time in Australia’s history that federal terrorism laws had been used to charge an alleged right-wing extremist. He immediately insinuated Galea’s guilt, saying he had “strong links to right-wing extremist organisations,” thus prejudicing any chance of a fair trial.

Keenan declared that the government was fulfilling its responsibility to “keep the Australian people safe” from “anybody who has violent extremist views who threatens” that safety. This language is wide enough to cover a range of political organisations, and points to a bid to legitimise the broader use of the terror laws.

Victorian police assistant commissioner Ross

Guenther declared that the arrest interrupted “something that could have been quite serious in terms of harming the community.” He said police acted on information that individuals were either “advocating” harm or “producing documents” that might lead to harm.

In a brief hearing on August 9, a federal police prosecutor asked for Galea to be held in detention until late November to give the police time to transcribe the calls and prepare the case. However, Galea’s lawyer objected that he was given only a vague summary of the charges against his client and opposed the lengthy delay. The magistrate set a committal hearing date of October 31.

Whatever exactly Galea is accused of, and that remains entirely unclear, the charges mark a shift in the police response to his activities. He was previously fined for possessing a knife at an anti-immigration rally. Last November, he was jailed for a month after pleading guilty to possessing five Tasers and 360 grams of mercury.

Since 2010, Galea has been publicly associated with anti-immigration and anti-Islam groups, most recently Reclaim Australia, the United Patriots Front and the True Blue Crew. These outfits seek to exploit and channel in nationalist and xenophobic directions the growing social discontent over the widening job losses, inequality and poverty imposed by successive Labor and Coalition governments.

While the terrorism laws might be utilised, at this point, against some right-wing elements, the real aim of the measures is to build up police-state powers to suppress the underlying unrest, and set precedents that can be used against left-wing and socialist organisations.

The Fairfax Media last Saturday indicated that the

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was targeting “extremism” across the political spectrum. After reporting that Galea’s arrest was prompted by ASIO monitoring of right-wing groups, the article cited ASIO’s 2014-15 annual report, which asserted that “violent rhetoric continued from extreme right-wing and left-wing individuals in Australia.”

In the other recent case, Kurdish journalist Renas Lelikan, 38, was arrested and charged late last month with being a member of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been proscribed as a “terrorist organisation” by consecutive governments since 2005.

An Australian citizen, Lelikan returned to the country from Iraq last October, saying he was escaping from the dangers of Islamic State (ISIS), which a PKK-linked militia, the Peoples Protection Units (YPG), is fighting in northern Iraq with the support of the US and its allies. On his return, Lelikan was questioned by the AFP for 10 hours, then released. No reason has been given for his arrest eight months later.

Lelikan was denied bail on July 29, after appearing in a Sydney court via video-link, handcuffed and dressed in an orange jumpsuit—the prison garb allocated to those convicted of terrorist-related offences. A magistrate ruled there were no “exceptional circumstances”—the extraordinary requirement to be granted bail under the terrorism laws. This was despite his lawyer arguing that he was no security threat because the PKK was not an enemy of Australia, and that Lelikan was being held in solitary confinement and faced threats by jailed ISIS supporters.

Since the still-unexplained attacks of September 2001, Australian governments, both Coalition and Labor, like their counterparts in the US, Britain and other imperialist powers, have used the pretext of combating terrorism as a cover for predatory wars in the Middle East, accompanied by draconian domestic laws, overturning basic legal and democratic rights and permitting mass surveillance.

The Australian laws define terrorism in such sweeping terms that they can cover many forms of political activity. Any act or threat intended to advance a “political, religious or ideological cause,” and “coercing, or influencing by intimidation” a government or “section of the public,” that damages property or endangers “public health or safety” is classified as terrorism, punishable by life

imprisonment.

As a result of extensions to the laws since 2001, no specific terrorist plot needs to be proved—not even a time or place. “Advocating,” preparing” and “conspiracy” provisions mean that people can be convicted for even discussing actions defined as terrorist.

Just before the latest arrests, the Turnbull government, backed by the Labor Party, unveiled further measures as its first political initiative since scraping back into office at the July 2 election. One will permit the indefinite incarceration of prisoners convicted of terrorism-related offences, after they have served their sentences. The other will allow 12-month control orders—which can include tracking devices or house arrest—to be imposed on children as young as 14.

Taken together, these developments indicate that the unstable government and political establishment, assisted by the media, is promoting terrorism scares to justify further bolstering the repressive powers of the police-intelligence-judicial apparatus in the face of rising social and class tensions. As the Socialist Equality Party warned during the election campaign, the “terrorism” powers are being prepared for wider use throughout the working class as economic conditions worsen and Australia’s involvement in US-led wars intensifies.



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