

State of emergency imposed in Malaysia, granting government sweeping powers

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A state of emergency was declared last week in Malaysia, reflecting the country's worsening political and social crisis, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the spread of the virus was the stated reason, the anti-democratic powers that the government now has in its hands are above all directed against the working class and the population more generally.

The king, Al-Sultan Abdullah, issued the emergency declaration last Tuesday at the request of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. A day earlier, Muhyiddin had announced a two-week lockdown of Kuala Lumpur and five states as well as a nationwide travel ban.

Muhyiddin described the situation as “very alarming” and said the country's healthcare system was “under tremendous pressure.” He added: “As I have said before, unprecedented situations call for unprecedented measures.”

The number of COVID-19 cases in October, when Muhyiddin first called for a state of emergency, was comparatively low at 13,000. The king refused the request. The number of cases, however, has risen sharply as the government eased restrictions.

By last Tuesday the daily infections had hit a new record of 3,309, bringing the total number of cases to more than 141,000 and over 550 deaths.

Dr. Suan Ee Ong, a Malaysian public health expert at Singapore-based think tank Research for Impact, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): “Most of our ICU beds are very, very full. Even our non-ICU beds are reaching capacity, especially in the major hospitals.”

In early January, a group of nearly 50 former and current senior healthcare workers addressed an open letter to the prime minister warning the government's measures were not bringing the virus under control.

“Our national metrics paint a very bleak picture of COVID-19 pandemic management,” it declared.

The letter called for a ramping up of testing, for more people to isolate at home, and for vaccine approval to be expedited “so that immunisation can begin as soon as the first doses of vaccines arrive at the airport.” Malaysia has ordered 25 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and also has an agreement to buy the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The prime minister, however, offered no explanation as to why the emergency declaration was necessary in order to adopt measures to contain the virus and safeguard public health. No such step was required last year between March and May, when the government imposed a stringent ban on mass gatherings and restrictions on movement. The police and military enforced the lockdown, making thousands of arrests.

The emergency proclamation hands the government sweeping powers. With the parliament suspended, the cabinet can make laws with virtually no restrictions on their scope. The state of emergency will be in force until August 1, so the shaky ruling coalition, which has a slim parliamentary majority, will avoid a no-confidence motion.

Since the end of British colonial rule in 1957, a national state of emergency has been invoked only once before—in 1969 amid race riots instigated by the dominant ethnic Malay establishment following substantial losses to the opposition parties in that year's general election. The constitution was suspended and parliament dissolved. A National Operations Council took over the government, imposing a curfew, censoring the media and arresting opposition politicians.

The current political crisis is far more severe. The right-wing and repressive United Malays National

Organisation (UMNO), which had held power since independence, was defeated for the first time in the May 2018 election by an unstable alliance between the party headed by former UMNO Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and an opposition coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim. In 1998, amid the Asian financial crisis, Mahathir expelled Anwar from UMNO, then had him arrested and jailed on trumped-charges.

The shaky ruling alliance fell apart when Mahathir resisted handing over the post of prime minister to Anwar after two years as part of their partnership agreement. Mahathir himself was pushed to one side by Muhyiddin, a minister from his own party, who formed a new ruling coalition with UMNO. Anwar challenged the Muhyiddin government last September, saying he had a majority in parliament and sought to form a fresh government, but the king denied his request.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the political crisis. The government proceeded with a state election in Sabah last September, despite warnings by health experts that it would lead to a spike in cases. Even though his party won the election, Muhyiddin later conceded that the election campaign, during which voters and politicians travelled to Sabah, had contributed to the rise in cases.

The growing discontent and opposition to the government is being fuelled by a sharp downturn in the economy and rising unemployment, which has hovered between 4.6 and 4.7 percent in recent months, up from 3.2 percent at the end of last year. The World Bank estimates that the Malaysian economy contracted by 5.8 percent last year. The bank's projection of a bounce back of 6.7 percent growth for 2021 is now in doubt as a result of the lockdown and travel ban.

Commenting to the ABC on the emergency declaration, Tengku Nur Qistina, a senior researcher at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, said: "The government can be said to [be prioritising] the nation's health security at the expense of democracy. With the emergency proclaimed, Parliament does not meet and this has been inferred as an obstruction of democracy [by] many."

Like its counterparts around the world, the Malaysian government's decision to lift restrictions from May onward was driven by the demands of business for a resumption of work to ensure profits, regardless of the danger to the health and lives of workers. The world's

largest medical glove manufacturer Top Glove was forced to shut down half its factories last November after thousands of its employees tested positive to COVID-19.

With the political establishment deeply divided, the weak coalition government has sought the state of emergency to concentrate police-state powers in its hands to suppress any social unrest. The Malaysian ruling class, which has a long history of autocratic forms of rule, is deeply fearful that the rising tide of working class struggle internationally will find its expression among Malaysian workers, who have been forced to bear the brunt of the pandemic.



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