

# Australian government banning Islamist group under laws that could illegalise political parties

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22 February 2026

Yesterday Labor's Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke revealed that his government has initiated the process of banning Hizb-ut Tahrir. The attempt to outlaw the Islamist group is the first use of legislation rammed through the federal parliament last month by Labor, providing the government with the power to illegalise organisations on the grounds that they promote "hate speech."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained previously, the legislation is one of the most far-reaching attacks on the fundamental democratic rights to freedom of political association and speech in decades.

Without even a pretence of judicial oversight or review, the government can criminalise organisations not because they have committed any wrongdoing, but simply for their political speech. Individuals accused of belonging to a banned organisation after such a declaration can then be imprisoned for up to a decade. Those are powers befitting a police-state dictatorship.

Burke essentially boasted of the draconian character of the legislation in announcing the plan to ban Hizb-ut Tahrir on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Insiders" program on Sunday.

"This is the first time we have been able to ban, potentially, a group which falls short of a terrorist listing," he declared. In other words, the government is not suggesting any link whatsoever between Hizb-ut Tahrir and terrorism.

The law, Burke went on, "says you don't have to be specifically calling for, but you do have to be acting in a way that increases the risk of communal violence or politically-motivated violence." That is an entirely subjective and vague barometer that could be deployed against virtually any oppositional speech.

It is clear that the government is using Hizb-ut Tahrir as a test case. The attempt to ban that organisation is aimed at setting a precedent that could be used far more broadly, including to target any anti-war, oppositional and socialist

organisations.

The history of Hizb-ut Tahrir and its activities in Australia underscore the massive shift that the government attack represents.

The organisation is an international political party that was founded in 1953 and has had a presence in Australia for decades, going back to the late 1980s. It is based on the reactionary tenets of political Islam.

Hizb-ut Tahrir, however, has a long-established record of opposition to individual terrorism. It has repeatedly raised that its primary focus is on the Middle East and other Muslim majority areas, where it opposes the existing often western-backed regimes, from the standpoint of establishing an Islamic Caliphate.

In the course of its activities, Hizb-ut Tahrir has made sharp condemnations of US-led wars and occupations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Those have raised the ire of Australian politicians over decades, with repeated calls for it to be banned.

But Labor and Coalition governments have always noted that such a prohibition would be impossible, because there is no evidence or indication that Hizb-ut Tahrir engages in terrorist conduct, but only in political speech. Now that too is to be criminalised.

Burke's remarks underscored not only the anti-democratic character of the banning provision, but also the draconian form it takes of essentially unanswerable executive power.

The reason that the government could now move against Hizb-ut Tahrir, he indicated, was because "The ASIO advice is now in," that the group meets the threshold.

That was a reference to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). It is not a judicial body or an impartial one, but the domestic spy agency.

ASIO has a record of surveillance, harassment and dirty tricks operations targeting anti-war, socialist and oppositional organisations spanning decades. Its power to provide a recommendation for an organisation to be banned

is essentially allowing the most repressive arm of the state apparatus to criminalise those it views as opponents.

Burke indicated he would then receive a departmental brief on the advice, before signing off on the ban. There is no court proceeding, independent review or oversight.

The “hate group” ban laws are one of a series of anti-democratic measures instituted by the Labor governments, federal and state, in the wake of the December 14 terrorist attack in Bondi.

There has still been no explanation as to how the two Islamic State-inspired terrorists were able to plan and execute their atrocity, under conditions where at least one of them had previously been surveilled by ASIO.

But with lightning speed, the governments have seized on the attack to carry out repressive measures curtailing the civil liberties of millions of people. In addition to the “hate group” laws, the Labor government has signalled that it will implement in full the recommendations of its “special envoy to combat antisemitism” Jillian Segal, which entail a sweeping assault against opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza across all walks of life.

In New South Wales (NSW), the Labor administration of Premier Chris Minns passed laws allowing for the state’s police commissioner to ban protests for up to three months in the wake of a terrorism designation.

That power was repeatedly activated in December, January and February and was deployed against protesters opposing the visit to Australia of Israeli president and war criminal Isaac Herzog, who was welcomed to the country by the federal Labor government. The NSW Police carried out a violent rampage against demonstrators in Sydney earlier this month, including the kettling of crowds, multiple violent assaults and the extensive use of pepper-spray.

The NSW government is also looking to emulate measures passed by the conservative administration in Queensland, prohibiting several pro-Palestinian chants.

The context makes clear that Hizb-ut Tahrir is only the first group that will be targeted with the federal banning power, not the last. When the legislation was put before parliament, Labor indicated its intention to illegalise the Islamist organisation as well as the neo-Nazi National Socialist Network (NSN). The NSN announced its supposed dissolution shortly after the laws were passed, while Hizb-ut Tahrir signalled a possible legal challenge.

The government’s aim was to first target organisations whose views are opposed by the majority of the population, to set a precedent.

But everything that Burke said about Hizb-ut Tahrir could be applied to any number of organisations that oppose the genocide. Minns, for instance, directly blamed up to 300,000 Sydneysiders who marched across the Harbour Bridge in

August opposing the starvation of Palestinians for the Bondi terrorist attack.

The government is clearly considering emulating the actions of its British Labour counterpart, which listed the Palestine Action group as a terrorist organisation last year, an attack on democratic rights deemed to be unlawful by a UK court earlier this month.

More broadly, the resort to authoritarian measures is a preemptive strike against growing social and political opposition from the working class on a host of issues.

Labor is fully committed to the US-led preparations for war with China, including the AUKUS plan to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US and the UK at a cost of \$368 billion. National-security commentators have insisted that this be a “whole-of-nation” war effort, involving the subordination of every aspect of civil society to the military.

On the social front, Labor has inflicted the biggest reversal to working-class living standards in decades. It is tasked by the corporate and financial elite with carrying out massive cuts to social spending, as well as a “productivity” agenda aimed at increasing the exploitation of workers and boosting corporate profits.

The resort to authoritarian measures mirrors the actions of governments globally, amid a breakdown of capitalism and a growth of social tensions. The attempts of Donald Trump to overturn the US Constitution and to erect a presidential dictatorship are only the sharpest expressions of a universal process.

The working class must oppose the onslaught on democratic rights. What is required is a political struggle against Labor and the entire establishment, including the formation of workplace rank-and-file committees, to prepare industrial and political action to defend fundamental civil liberties. That is inseparable from the fight for a socialist perspective, aimed at abolishing inequality, militarism and the repressive state apparatus, and their source, the capitalist system.



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