

Malaysia Starts a Harsh Crackdown

Government officials use the Internal Security Act against ethnic Indian protesters

Sunday 16 December 2007 (Date first published: 13 November 2007).

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Malaysia used its harsh Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial, against five leaders of Malaysia's Hindu Rights Action Force, or Hindraf, which organized a raucous demonstration in Kuala Lumpur on November 25. It was the first time the law is believed to have been used since 2001.

The five were reported to be Hindraf legal adviser P. Uthayakumar, M. Manoharan, R. Kenghadharan, V. Ganabathirau and T. Vasanthakumar — prominent members of the group, which organized the mass anti-discrimination rally by as many as 30,000 ethnic Indians which turned violent, with protesters battling police with motorcycle helmets. One officer was injured. Subsequently 31 members of the march were charged with sedition and attempted murder.

The use of the ISA is the latest turn of the wheel in a growing crackdown on protests that have periodically paralyzed the Malaysian capital for more than month. Police Chief Musa Hassan warned on Dec. 11 that more ethnic Indians would be arrested and charged for their involvement in anti-government protests. Anwar Ibrahim, the de facto leader of the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party), and other organizations had vowed to lead protest marches in the capital cities of all of Malaysia's 13 states over the next month.

The warnings by police and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi himself have so far had little effect. On Monday, protesters attempted to deliver a memorandum to parliament, demanding that the country's elections chief not be given an additional term in advance of elections that are believed to be scheduled for sometime next year. Police attempts to block the protests once again paralyzed traffic across the city as officials stood by with water cannons but did not use them. De facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was warned when he arrived in Kuala Lumpur from a visit to Cairo that he had been placed on a watch list.

The ISA has been criticized repeatedly by both international and domestic human rights organizations including Human Rights Watch, the Malaysian Bar Council, and the Malaysian Human Rights Commission on grounds that it violates fundamental international standards. Enacted in the early 1960s by the British colonial government during a national state of emergency to put down a communist insurrection, it allows for detention of any person the police deem to be a threat for up to 60 days.

Detainees are denied access to legal counsel. Police can act on suspicion that an individual "has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia or any part thereof or to maintenance of essential services therein or to the economic life thereof." The law allows the Minister of Home Affairs to extend detention for up to two years without trial or submission of evidence. The detention order can be renewed indefinitely. Some 100 people currently are detained under the law, according to the AFP wire service, most of them Islamic militants.

The protests are a growing concern for Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who has repeatedly warned that street demonstrations would not be tolerated, only to have the protests take place anyhow. The first was on Nov. 10, when as many as 30,000 people marched in defiance of a ban on November 10 to present a petition on election grievances to the palace of Malaysia's hereditary king.

On Nov. 27, Abdullah Badawi warned that the ISA could come into play if the protesters didn't stop, saying that he would refuse to allow the country's safety to be jeopardized. The government has been criticized by the US Department of States for the security crackdown, and a wide range of human rights organizations have also protested the action.

On Wednesday, the four major opposition parties and 17 domestic non-government organizations issued a statement that they are "are especially troubled by the racial and religious antagonism that now pervades Malaysian society," adding that they deplored the heavy-handed actions of the authorities in the series of arrests that took place earlier this week.

In a speech Monday organized by Khazana Nasional, the government investment arm, Abdullah Badawi sought to address charges that he is weak. "I can be nice," he told the 700-odd political and corporate leaders and others. "Being nice is your character and you cannot change. But being nice does not mean one is weak."

The prime minister, who also serves as Internal Security Minister, also repeated that he is ready to resort to the country's harsh Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial indefinitely, saying he would not "feel guilty or sad" if he is forced to sign detention orders if the reasons are justified.

*** From Asia Sentinel:**

13 December 2007

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Malaysian Police Continue Their Crackdown

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Anwar Ibrahim is briefly detained, other opposition figures are arrested as tests turn into a test of wills for Abdullah Badawi.

Hadi Awang and Anwar Ibrahim at the Bersih Rally (Nov. 10, 2007)

In a clear sign that the government of Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is fed up with continuing protest, immigration officials detained de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim at the country's Subang Jaya Airport Tuesday before releasing him, and arrested at least 12 opposition leaders who attempted to protest at the Dewan Rakyat, or Parliament.

As has happened with increasing frequency in Kuala Lumpur, police Tuesday attempted to block protesters from reaching the parliament building, once again paralyzing traffic across the city.

Officials stood by with water cannons but did not use them. Five opposition protesters got into the parliament building by riding through a police cordon in the cars of elected opposition figures.

Anwar, who was informed by immigration officials that he had been placed on a watch list, was freed after about half an hour. The continuing actions against opposition figures constitute the biggest crackdown since the one time deputy prime minister was fired in 1998 by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. After his firing, Anwar drew as many as 100,000 people to rallies in Kuala Lumpur and other cities before being arrested. He later spent more than five years in prison on charges that critics and human rights groups said were trumped up.

Anwar called the airport detention "just a clear harassment," telling reporters that "It's a desperate attempt to harass and intimidate the public and deflect the attention from major issues of corruption among (United Malays National Organisation) leaders and the judiciary."

The government appeared to be ignoring a call by the US Department of State in Washington, DC to allow freedom of assembly and expression of views in Malaysia.

"We have repeatedly raised with Malaysian authorities our belief that citizens of any country should be allowed to peacefully assemble and express their views," department spokeswoman Nancy Beck told the AFP wire service. "We also stated in our annual human rights report our belief that the Malaysian government places significant restrictions on the right to assemble peacefully," she said. Opposition politicians and local and international human rights organizations have repeatedly condemned the crackdown.

The protests are a growing test of strength for Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who came to office following Mahathir in 2003 as a reformer but is increasingly seen as out of touch and unable to control the situation. He has repeatedly warned that street demonstrations would not be tolerated, only to have the protests take place anyway. As many as 30,000 people marched in defiance of a ban on November 10 to present a petition on election grievances to the palace of Malaysia's hereditary king. On Nov. 25, a protest by as many as another 30,000 ethnic Indians turned violent, with protesters battling police with motorcycle helmets. One officer was injured. Subsequently the leaders of the march were charged with sedition and attempted murder.

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In the growing crackdown, authorities Monday filed three separate legal actions against organizers of the protests that paralyzed Kuala Lumpur in November and threw a lawyer in jail overnight for displaying protests signs at the headquarters of the Malaysian Bar Council on Sunday.

Among the leaders arrested for taking part in the Tuesday rally was Tian Chua, a senior official of Parti Keadilan, which Anwar in effect heads despite the fact that his imprisonment bars him from being involved in politics until next year.

Tian was arrested after the car he was in drove through a police cordon in an attempt to hand a memorandum to the Speaker of the Assembly opposing plans to amend the constitution to enable the current elections commission chief to continue serving for another year.

On Monday, eight people, including two opposition party leaders, were arrested for taking part in a banned Nov. 10 rally in Kuala Lumpur. Later Monday, police issued a restraining order to stop the electoral reform group Bersih from today's gathering.

*** *From Asia Sentinel:***

11 December 2007

http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=927&Itemid=31