

Malaysia: Repression fails to stop anti-price-hike campaign

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Leaders of the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) have vowed to defy court rulings banning them from participating in public assemblies. The court orders were placed on 35 opposition party and grassroots activists who were charged with illegal assembly following a January 26 protest against price hikes imposed by the government-owned oil corporation, Petronas.

The demonstration, outside the company's iconic headquarters — the Petronas Twin Towers — had been banned by the government, however 1500 people defied police violence to attend. Sixty people, including journalists, were detained.

PSM secretary general S. Arutchelvan was charged with defying a court order banning him and other opposition leaders from being within two kilometres of the Twin Towers.

While entrenched communalism, police and judicial repression and bureaucratic restrictions on democracy mean that the Barisan Nasional (BN) — which has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957 — is unlikely to be seriously threatened in this years' elections which are due this year, anti-government protests drawing tens of thousands in November showed the real extent of discontent.

More than 130 people were charged in the crackdown that followed these protests, and leaders of the Hindu community rights group Hindraf were detained under the colonial-era Internal Security Act.

At the root of the discontent is the reduction of living standards resulting from successive BN governments adhering to the economic "development" models provided by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other institutions of First World financial power.

Anti-people policies

These policies — which have included privatising or corporatising water, electricity, garbage collection, health, education and transport providers — have given Malaysia the second-highest income disparity in the Asia-Pacific after Papua New Guinea.

Petronas has become a focus of anti-neoliberal campaigning because fuel price hikes (to boost the profits of the corporation's unaccountable stakeholders) have a flow-on inflationary effect, pricing many essential commodities out of the reach of ordinary people. The January 26 protest was organised by the Coalition Against Inflation (PROTES), which was formed in 2006 by opposition parties and grassroots organisations.

On January 26, two columns of protesters attempted to march on the Petronas Twin Towers but were prevented by riot police using tear gas and water cannon. One of these columns, mobilised by the PSM and the Movement of Oppressed People (JERIT), marched from the local railway station. The other column, which assembled at a local mosque, was mobilised by the Islamic party PAS.

Despite their different ideologies, the PSM and PAS were able to agree on “a minimum program on this issue because the issues are class based and not religious based”, Arutchevan explained in a January 31 article posted on the site of socialist e-journal Links (

Also involved in PROTES is the People’s Justice Party (PKR), led by former deputy PM Anwar Ibrahim, who became a focus of opposition in 1997 after his sacking and imprisonment by then-PM Mahatir Mohamed. The PKR has attracted a number of civil society activists.

The 60 people arrested at the rally were detained for two days. Vigils outside the jails where they were held and a global campaign in their support helped ensure that they were either granted bail or unconditionally released.

Defying repression

PROTES is planning another rally on February 23, which the charged PSM leaders will participate in in defiance of their bail conditions, vowing, in a January 30 press release, to “continue to challenge this obtuse ruling and defy any ruling or court order which goes against the fundamental liberties of the people. We cannot remain silent and allow kangaroo courts to interpret ... justice and curtail our freedom.”

When the government sets an election date, the PSM plans to run candidates for three seats in the Perak state parliament and in one federal electorate. Because of restrictive “Registration of Societies” laws, however, the candidates will not be able to run under the PSM banner. Instead, the PSM candidates will run on the PKR ticket.

The PSM has appealed to other opposition parties to move away from the communalist politics of ethnic and religious identity that have kept the BN in power for 50 years.

The seats where the PSM candidates will be running are in places where the party has been involved in long-term grassroots campaigns, particularly among plantation workers. Some of these campaigns have won victories.

For example, on January 15, workers at the Brooklands Estate won the right to own their homes on the plantation after a 13-year-long struggle with the plantation’s owners, the multinational Lion Group. During this campaign, a number of workers and PSM activists, including Arutchevan, were arrested and charged.

P.S.

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