

Malaysia's Premier Vows to Go After Protesters

The country's draconian Internal Security Act may come into play

Friday 30 November 2007, by [SHAH YAKOB Imran Imtiaz](#), [ZAPPEI Julia](#) (Date first published: 28 November 2007).

Beset by two major protest demonstrations over the last month, and facing the possibility of more in December, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is warning that he would use Malaysia's Internal Security Act against protesters if they threaten national security or disrupt racial harmony.

"The ISA is there. If the situation warrants it, it will be used," Abdullah Badawi said during a press conference on his return from a visit to Cairo. He said he would leave it to police to assess whether upcoming demonstrations are put national security at risk.

The threat represents a significant and disheartening course correction for the prime minister, who in the past has been negative on the law. However, analysts in Kuala Lumpur say, it is a reflection of the growing perception of Abdullah Badawi's political weakness despite his 76 percent overall approval rating in advance of elections expected to be held early next year.

Future rallies are planned in all of Malaysia's 13 states by Bersih, the clean-government organization that staged a massive demonstration on Nov. 10, with the help of three major opposition parties. The annual Human Rights March organized by the Bar Council human rights committee is also planned for next month. Anwar Ibrahim, the deposed former deputy prime minister who became the de facto leader of the opposition after he was released from prison, is threatening additional pressure on the government.

In addition, last weekend, the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) organized demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur to protest the treatment Malaysia's 2 million Indians. Also, earlier a march of some 10,000 lawyers descended on Putrajaya, the country's administrative capital, to protest judicial corruption.

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." "The ISA is a preventive measure to spare the nation from untoward incidents that can harm the prevailing peace and harmony and create all sorts of adverse things," the prime minister said.

The Bar Council, which represents about 12,000 lawyers, said that invoking the law is "retrogressive, counterproductive, and smacks of extreme high handedness."

"Gone are the days when force could be used to solve our problems. We are entering a new era of openness and democracy. A vital part of that process is to hear the voice of the people and to heed their call," the council said in a statement.

The law was used by Abdullah Badawi's predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad, particularly in 1987 in a crackdown over racial tensions called Operation Lalang, which resulted in the arrest of 116 people and the closure of two newspapers. Opposition leaders Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh as well as members of Parti Sa-Islam Malaysia and many social activists were thrown in jail for a full two years.

Abdullah Badawi has faced a growing number of negative issues in recent months including rising racial tensions in Malaysia's always-volatile equation between Malays and the Chinese, the second-biggest ethnic group. They came to the surface over the court's refusal to allow a Malay woman to change her identity card to reflect the fact that she had switched religions from Islam to Catholic, widespread perceptions of judicial corruption that include the release of a videotaped conversation that purported to show a prominent lawyer discussing the appointment of pliant judges with the then-head of the federal court and a murder case whose defendants have close links to the deputy prime minister that have been kept under wraps by the court. He has also faced a revolt from the country's sultans, led by Azlan Shah, the Sultan of Perak, over favoritism in judicial appointments.

Originally regarded as a reformer when he followed Mahathir to power in 2003, he vowed to wipe out corruption "without fear or favor." And said he would seek to rid the country of racial and religious polarization. However, the prime minister has been accused of "sleepwalking" through his term, while his son-in-law, Khairy Jamaluddin, is resented by many critics as having gained inordinate power. Khairy has said publicly that he enjoys the prime minister's protection. Although Abdullah Badawi vowed to put an end to many of the expensive white-elephant projects initiated by his predecessor, political pressure from the stalwarts in the United Malays National Organization, the leading ethnic party in the Barisan Nasional, or national ruling coalition, has largely kept him from doing so.

The question, however, is not the perception of him among Malaysia's rank-and-file voters as much as it is inside UMNO itself. Despite the crowds that opposition parties are drawing, it appears almost impossible that any Barisan parties would be defeated. Part of his problem, analysts say, is that he has had to modify his anti-corruption rhetoric to keep the party's old guard in line.

By IMRAN IMTIAZ SHAH YACOB

* From Asia Sentinel:

http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=904&Itemid=31

80 Indians Charged with Taking Part in Illegal Rally in Malaysia

By Julia Zappei/AP Writer/Kuala Lumpur

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At least 80 ethnic Indians were charged in court Wednesday with talking part in a massive, banned

rally to demand equal rights for minority Indians in the Muslim-majority country.

The Indians, who were charged in at least five different courts, pleaded not guilty to “participating in an illegal assembly” on Sunday by about 10,000 people, said a defense lawyer, Saha Deva A. Arunasalam. Many were freed on bail.

Some were also charged with refusing to disperse and trying to injure police officers, said Arunasalam and his colleague, Joshua Sambantha. If convicted, they could be jailed for between six months and five years, the lawyers said.

The 80 people were arrested during the unprecedented demonstration in downtown Kuala Lumpur which stunned the normally peaceful nation. The protests lasted about seven hours despite the repeated firing of tear gas and water cannons by police.

“People won’t be deterred. They want to put their foot down,” said P. Uthayakumar, one of the organizers of the rally. “To me it is racially motivated. The public will have more hatred for the government.”

Ethnic Indians, mostly descendants of 19th century plantation workers brought to Malaysia from southern India by British colonial officials, say they face discrimination because of an affirmative action policy which favors Malay Muslims in jobs, education, business and government contracts.

Malays form about 60 percent of Malaysia’s 27 million people and control politics and the government. Indians comprise 8 percent and are the second biggest minority after Chinese, who make up a quarter of the population.

Most Indians earn low incomes and work in menial jobs. They also have low education and have a small share of corporate equity.

Indians also complain that Malaysia’s Muslim-dominated government is becoming increasingly Islamic and is denying them their religious rights, citing the recent demolition of several Hindu temples.

The government denies that discrimination exists, and has accused the rally organizers of trying to create racial animosity. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi warned Tuesday that he might enforce a security law that allows indefinite detention without trial to prevent future demonstrations.

Thiruchelven Rajoo, a 30-year-old electrician who was charged in court Wednesday, said he didn’t regret taking part in the rally because it helped draw attention to the plight of Indians in the country.

“I am not worried because I am doing it for my rights. It is unfair to all Indians in Malaysia ... they treat us like dogs,” he said.

The Bar Council urged the government to look into the grievances of the Indian community rather than punish them. The council is providing free legal services to the protesters.

“Using a heavy hand in the (rally) was unnecessary. It has caused far more problems than necessary,” said its president, Ambiga Sreenevasan.

* From The Irrawaddy:

http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9438