

Malaysia: People's power defeats evictions at Kampung Buah Pala — for now

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Pulau Pinang, Malaysia,

Today was the moment of truth for Kampung Buah Pala villagers. It was the third time that their homes have faced demolition. But it was the first time that the local villagers outnumbered the outsiders who were the majority during the previous attempt on August 4. Today, when the police, the developer and the bailiff came, the villagers did not have the luxury of the presence of state assemblymen, MPs, the state government representative or even lawyers. Only a handful of Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM, Parti Sosialis Malaysia) members and Hindraf [a civil rights organisation] supporters were with the villagers.

The PSM has been fighting side by side with the villagers for several months. In a July 1 statement, the PSM said it was fully aware that the previous state government under the Barisan National is to blame for the current problems in Kampung Buah Pala, Penang; yet the Democratic Action Party-led Pakatan Rakyat government cannot just wash its hands off yet and blame the previous Government all the way. In fact it puts to test or rather gives Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng a chance to prove that his government is pro-people [rather than] being pro-capitalist.''
The PSM said that through its experience offighting and championing many urban poor settlement it sees that the biggest conflict surrounding land disputes as not questions of ethnicity or heritage but rather the question of class. In most cases, the capitalist class using its financial muscle obtains land by buying the state government and its politicians. The poor settlers who have spent decades developing the land are left in the lurch and shown the exit door. The legal argument is standard — they are illegals, squatters and trespassers. They have been adequately compensated or these people are anti-development."

"We have heard these same mantras over and over. These mantras have been used to evict the orang asli [Indigenous people], plantation workers, farmers and urban settlers over the years. In most cases the state and the legal system is with the rich and the developers. In cases where the people have triumphed, it is because of the resistance and struggle they put forward. It is very seldom where the law has sided with the poor."

Police, gangsters and developers

As early as 9am on August 13, the Balai Polis berGerak (mobile police van), the Light Strike Force and the General Operation Force (PGA) were ready. The demolition squad made up of Contractors (SRE Ventures) grouped at a nearby Shell station around 10am. Then they tried to come in from the front along with two tractors and 50 workers wearing green T-shirts. They were armed with sledgehammers and hammers. Some of them were identified by the local people as gangsters employed by the developer. This time they had no Bangladeshi [immigrant] workers. The demolition squad was made up of mostly local Malay and Chinese workers and gangsters. The villagers are all Indian Malaysians. In other eviction areas, similar tactics have been used to divide the people by race. Today was no different.

The villagers did not get sidetracked this time. They handled it very well. They formed their own barricade, at the bridge and faced the police. According to Bernama, “mostly women and children, they refused to leave the site although it was raining heavily. They were also reported to have collected cow-dung in preparation to strike back if their homes were demolished.”

According PSM central committee Member Choo Chon Kai, who was there, initially the villagers numbered around 60, mainly women and children, but later other villagers arrived making the number around 150, matching the demolition squad.

At one point the police started pushing to make way for the contractors and the bulldozers but the villagers pushed them back. The men at the front pushed some more and fought very bravely. There were small scuffles and lots of shouting. One woman fainted and another was injured and this created more anger among the villagers and more confusion among the police. In the end the police gave up and ordered the police and developers to stand down.

At around 11am, the police and contractors tried to come in from the back of the village but villagers managed to block them. Police and the bailiff marked two more houses for demolition. Gary Ho, the developer from Nusmetro, was with the bailiff but he was very worried and panicked as he did not expect such a resistance from the villagers. Gary Ho was seen busily trying to find an escape road to leave the village.

At this point, more people from outside had arrived to assist the villagers. Besides this, there were also other tensions when the bailiff was already inside the village and started marking houses to be demolished. He also gave between 15-30 minutes for them to pack up. According to PSM/JERIT member Kris Kaira, the villagers and himself locked themselves in houses to prevent their forced eviction.

It was yet another standoff outside on the bridge with the police who started pushing the villagers again to make way for the tractors. This time the villagers were angrier and pushed them back all the way to the tractors.

Resistance wins reprieve

As the hours passed, the developer was not moving forward. The police were also quite restrained. Finally the developer drafted an agreement to postpone the evictions until August 31. The agreement said the villagers had to move out on that date, after which the villagers will face eviction. After some consultation, the villagers voted and agreed to sign the agreement as it will give them more time.

For today the villagers have once again stopped the eviction and saved their village. The battle is not over. Sounding relieved, Kris Kaira was proud of the villagers, “They had the chance to fight by themselves and realise they can do it alone. They were very strong today and there was more teamwork, more consensus decision making and they finally realised who was on their side.” Unless an amicable solution is found, the land dispute and the battle for this small piece of land of Kampung Buah Pala will continue. For today, the power of the people, with only cow-dung as weapons, has won the day.