

Malaysia's Opposition Stands Up To Racism And Intimidation

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Some parties in Malaysia's ruling National Front (BN) government are trying to intimidate opposition parties and social activists, Socialist Party Malaysia (PSM) secretary general S.Arutchelvan told *Green Left Weekly*, a few days after the PSM's sole federal MP, Dr D. Jeyakumar, had his car torched by thugs on October 17.

The previous day a 26-year-old human rights activist, Cheng Lee Whee, was arrested and remanded overnight under the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA) after she made a report accusing the police of abuse of power in an eviction of a poor squatter colony in the state of Johor that day. She was charged with "spreading false information". Cheng had complained that some 27 squatters and their supporters attempting to stop the demolition of the a predominantly Malay village Kampung Baru Plentong Tengah on October 16. Riot police, backed by water cannon, carried out the violent eviction.

Choo Shinn Chei, a PSM activist, also had her laptop and pendrive confiscated by police in this incident.

More ISA detentions

This follows mounting arrests and detentions of other activists - and even bloggers - under the ISA. This has provoked thousands to demonstrate in recent months for repeal of this colonial-era detention-without-trial law.

On October 23, police arrested 12 people (including a six-year-old girl) trying to submit a letter to Prime Minister to seek the release of recent ISA detainees from the Malaysian Indian rights movement, Hindraf. Arutchelvan warned that the UMNO-led government facing an internal party crises as well as the global financial crises is prepared to use force and oppression to remain in power.

Opposition gains

All this comes against the background of dramatic gains by opposition parties this year. Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the People's Front (PR) opposition alliance has recently been elected back to Parliament in a by-election. Despite facing a new government inspired frame-up for "sodomy", Anwar is threatening to unseat the BN government through defections to the opposition by government MPs.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant party in the BN, has long exploited racial politics to maintain a strong hold on the Malay section of the population since the party was set up in power by the departing British colonialists after World War II.. However, opposition parties have begun to win over substantial support from Malays, over the last few years.

"UMNO wants to stop opposition parties from reaching Malay communities," explained Arutchelvan. "For example, on October 22, there was a demo outside our Selangor state assembly member Nasir

Hashim's office about 50-80 UMNO members. It was very racist and sectarian. They reminded Nasir that as he is a Muslim he should not go against Muslim, simply because Nasir had asked a question in the state assembly zakat money [Muslim alms for the poor] could be extended to poor non-Malays."

In the Johor incident, the authorities were particularly upset that Chinese activists had gone to support a poor Malay kampung community facing eviction, Arutchelvan said.

He added that the latest arrests of the 12 people seeking the release of ISA detainees was "yet another attempt to draw the Indians against the Malays".

On the other hand, the torching of PSM MP's car was a continuation of the rivalry between PSM and UMNO's partner, the Malaysian Indian Congress, for support from poor Indian communities in the Sungai Siput electorate in Perak state. Arutchelvan said that there had been many thug attacks against PSM members in the electorate. However, following the torching, for the first time the police have charged a number of people for criminal intimidation.

Race politics losing ground

However, Arutchelvan added, some BN parties, such as the Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan) and the People's Progressive Party (PPP), are trying to distance themselves from the increasingly racist and intimidatory political tactics by UMNO.

"In previous attempts, UMNO has been successful in dividing and widening the ethnic divide but today such measures do not seem to work."

Meanwhile, the PSM continues its to promote class politics against Malaysia's elite parties' tradition of communal and religious politics. After winning its first federal MP and first state assembly member in the March 2008 general elections, the PSM support base continues to grow. It finally won the right to apply for electoral registration in September this year, after waging a 10-year-long legal and popular struggle.

More than 1,500 celebrated this win in a annual fund-raising dinner in Ipoh on September 13 and another Some 800 people attended a rally to celebrate this victory in Kuala Lumpur on October 19. Guest speakers at the rally included leaders of other Malaysian opposition parties including the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Justice Party (PKR) and Party Islam (PAS). One of the guest speakers was DAP MP Teresa Kok whose home was recently firebombed after she received racist threats.

More information about the PSM's progress can be read at:

<http://www.parti-sosialis.org>

P.S.

* From ASAP website. <http://www.asia-pacific-action.org/node/201>

Source: Green Left Weekly