

# Malaysia Political Tension Ratchets Up

Monday 11 May 2009, by [Correspondant\(es\)](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2009).

## Crisis erupts in Perak state over who controls the statehouse

Any hope that Malaysia's political situation would stabilize with the April selection of Najib Tun Razak as prime minister appeared to be dimming this week with the arrest of at least four individuals, one a political reformer who was charged with sedition, and with restiveness growing in the northern state of Perak.

Wong Chin Haut, a spokesman for the reform group Bersih (Clean) was arrested at his home Tuesday night in Kuala Lumpur after calling a press conference earlier in the day to urge the public to wear black Wednesday to protest the takeover of what was then the opposition-held Perak state government in February after Najib persuaded three assembly members to quit the opposition coalition amid charges that their allegiance had been bought.

On Wednesday, Parti Islam se-Malaysia vice president Mohamad Sabu, Parti Keadilan Rakyat Youth Leader Badrul Hisham and another unnamed activist were arrested as well. It isn't known what they were charged with. Local media reported that Mohamad Sabu had publicly announced he would seek to hold mass prayers of the PAS followers in Ipoh over the Perak state assembly sitting.

One UMNO insider in Kuala Lumpur told Asia Sentinel that he didn't expect large numbers of rank and file members of the United Malays National Organization to show up in Perak, although Mohamad's prayer session was expected to draw large numbers.

"I think the PAS people with Quran in hand will lie on the streets and protest but I don't think the Barisan people will be out in droves," he said.

It may well be that both of the opposing factions in the assembly will attempt to physically occupy the seats overnight to keep their opposite numbers from doing so, he added.

The burgeoning crisis stems from a standoff in Perak, where the opposition leader, Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin, refused to give up his office in November last year despite being ordered to by Sulan Raja Azlan Shah, the state's titular head, who dissolved the assembly and designated Zambry Abdul Kadir, an UMNO stalwart, as the new chief minister.

The parliamentary standoff has been adding to tension ever since despite the fact that in a March by-election, Nizar, the head of Perak's Islam-based Parti Islam se-Malaysia, cleaned Zambry's clock. Nizar's victory, viewed as a barometer for anti-Barisan feeling in the state after Najib's tactics in persuading the three opposition members to change sides, dealt a major propaganda blow to the Barisan and raised the pressure to preserve the opposition's hegemony in the statehouse. The sultan, refusing to be intimidated, recently named Zambry a datuk, a government honorific.

In addition to seeking to keep the Barisan from taking over the statehouse as a result of the sultan's decree, the opposition is also calling for a new state election to end the standoff. However, after having lost the by-election so decisively, Najib views calling a new election as untenable.

"The Perak situation is very tense," said a Kuala Lumpur-based political operative for the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition. "The Barisan Nasional has gone through flaming hoops to try to justify the legality of its takeover but it appears to have been unsuccessful. There is a mass protest developing which will happen tomorrow in Perak."

Concerns over mass demonstrations in Perak led the police to order the closure of sections of all major roads leading into Ipoh, 170-odd kilometers north of Kuala Lumpur, and to warn against demonstrations.

The assembly is currently deadlocked at 28-28 after the sultan's dismissal of the opposition leadership. However, the opposition leadership said it would use parliamentary maneuvers to refuse to allow the UMNO chief minister appointed by the sultan and six of his executive council members to attend the new assembly session. If the seven are barred, that would leave the Barisan with 24 votes, including the three lawmakers that Najib persuaded to jump ship.

"It will be very embarrassing for the government if the speaker is able to reject any legitimacy of the new Barisan chief minister," the Kuala Lumpur-based political source said.

The arrest of Wong and the others is evidence of the rising tension – as well as a possible indication of how thin Najib's skin is to insults. Bersih, nominally nonpartisan but often aligned with the opposition, has grown into a formidable protest organization, leading demonstrations in November of 2007 that brought tens of thousands into the streets of Kuala Lumpur, demanding election reform.

At his press conference, Wong issued a statement asking people to wear black was aimed at Najib himself. The campaign slogan "1BlackMalaysia: Democracy first, elections now," is a direct parody of Najib's new slogan as prime minister: "1Malaysia: People first, performance now."

Since his takeover as prime minister in early April, Najib has publicly attempted to cool tensions, even going so far as to take his wife to an ethnic Indian area to flip chapattis, the ubiquitous Indian flatbread. However, he has come into office a crippled prime minister, partly over a long series of scandals stemming from his time as defense minister, and partly because UMNO itself is riven with dissension, the coalition has been weakened by losing four of five by-elections since national elections last year, and the country is facing growing economic problems as its export-oriented economy flags in the face of the global financial crisis.

---

**P.S.**

Posted by Asia Sentinel.

[http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1859&Itemid=178&limit=1&limitstart=1](http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1859&Itemid=178&limit=1&limitstart=1)