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Malaysia: Arrest of blogger highlights continued repression

Amnesty International today urged the Malaysian government to abolish the Internal Security Act (ISA) as it was used to arrest and detain the blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin.

The Malaysian government is using this law as a repressive measure to control dissent. It should be revoked immediately, and Raja Petra, along with over 60 others currently held under the ISA, should be either charged with an offence and brought to fair trial, or released immediately.

Police routinely hold those arrested under the ISA in incommunicado detention, without access to family or lawyers, for the first 60 days, greatly increasing the risk of torture or other ill-treatment.

On 12 September ten members of the police arrested online social commentator Raja Petra Kamarudin under the ISA for threatening national security and potentially “caus[ing] tension among the country’s multi-racial and multi-religious society”. At 1:50pm, police took him to an unknown destination, after confiscating his computer and other possessions.

In several media reports, Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar stated that Raja Petra, the editor of news portal Malaysia Today, is being detained under Section 73(1) of the ISA which allows for initial detention without charge for up to 60 days. Six days before the arrest, the minister had warned that Raja Petra Kamarudin could be charged under the ISA for allegedly insulting Islam and Prophet Muhammad.

His arrest came the day after the government removed a block on the Malaysia Today web portal, which the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) had ordered all internet service providers in the country to impose on it on 27 August. This was for allegedly posting offensive comments.

In May 2008 Raja Petra was arrested under the Sedition Act and released on bail pending trial. He was arrested for allegedly implying that the Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak was involved in the killing of a young Mongolian woman. He was later charged with three counts of criminal defamation in July 2008.

Background

The government continues to use or threaten to use the Internal Security Act 1960 against people whom they accuse of being threats to national security, including government critics and those allegedly involved in “terrorist-linked” activities.

The ISA allows the police to arrest individuals they believe have acted, or are “about to” or “likely to” act in a way that would threaten Malaysian security, “essential services” or “economic life” (Article 73 (1)b). After initial 60 day detention for “investigation”, the ISA allows for detention without trial for up to two years renewable indefinitely, without the detainee being charged with a crime or tried in a court of law. It limits the political space for important debates on issues of economic policy, corruption and other social challenges.

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