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Malaysia: Government Crackdown on Freedom of Expression

Amnesty International calls on the Malaysian authorities to release five government critics arrested in the last two days, or charge them with recognizable criminal offences.

This wave of arrests is part of a crackdown on dissent by the new government of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. The authorities appear to have arrested people merely for expressing their political views or gathering peacefully to protest government actions.

On 5 May 2009, police arrested university lecturer and activist Wong Chin Huat under Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act. Wong represents the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (BERSIH), a group of civil society organizations and political parties campaigning for reforms to the electoral process in Malaysia.

Police arrested him on the same day BERSIH called on Malaysians to wear black on 7 May as a mark of protest against the ruling government's takeover of the Perak state government.

Political tensions have increased in Perak state since the Perak Sultan ordered its Chief Minister, Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin, a member of the People's Alliance (PA), the opposition coalition, to resign in February, following three defections from the PA to the ruling party. The government's representative, Zambrly Abdul Kadir was then appointed as the new Chief Minister. A state assembly session will take place on the 7 May when Zambrly is expected to formally take up his position.

Within 24 hours of Wong's arrest, police arrested Mohamad Sabu, the Vice President of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), part of the opposition coalition. It is believed that his arrest is related to his plan to hold a mass prayer session on 7 May at a mosque two kilometres from the state assembly.

Reports indicate that copies of a court order barring all supporters of political parties from gathering within 500 metres of the state assembly building have been posted in nearby areas. The Inspector General of Police, Musa Hassan has stated that police will take action against any persons breaching the order.

Today police also arrested Sani Mohd Shah, Saufi Mihat, and Yasir Sheikh Abdul Rahman when the three men attempted to deliver a cake and a letter to Prime Minister Najib, commemorating the 31st birthday of Altantuya Shaariibuu, a Mongolian model who was murdered three years ago. In April 2009 two members of the security forces were found guilty of her murder and sentenced to death. Razak Baginda, one of Prime Minister Najib's advisors, was acquitted of abetting the murder in October 2008.

This evening police arrested at least 14 people, part of a group who had gathered at Brickfields Police Station in Kuala Lumpur, in support of Wong Chin Huat who is being held there. They have all since been released.

Background

If found guilty, Wong Chin Huat could face a jail term of up to three years. He was initially denied access to his lawyers until his court appearance today and has been remanded into custody until Friday 8 May.

During a nationwide swoop in March, eight bloggers were charged with posting critical comments of the Sultan of Perak. They were charged under the Communication and Media Act and released on bail. In addition opposition parliamentarian and lawyer Karpal Singh was also charged under the Sedition Act for his threat to sue the Sultan of Perak over the political crisis in Perak State. Singh, who is free on bail, had claimed that the Sultan had breached the State's constitution when directing the resignation of the Chief Minister.

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