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Malaysia: Amnesty International declares Anwar a prisoner of conscience

Former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his 14 political associates detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) are prisoners of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released, Amnesty International today.

The human rights organization expressed serious concern that the men are at risk of ill-treatment -- including the aggressive, prolonged interrogation techniques previous ISA detainees have suffered -- while held in incommunicado detention at an unknown location.

"Anwar and his associates are prisoners of conscience detained solely for non-violently calling for political reforms and for holding different opinions to the Prime Minister," Amnesty International said. "Prime Minister Mahathir should immediately and unconditionally release them."

"By misusing Malaysia's laws to detain his political opponents, Prime Minister Mahathir is contravening international legal standards on freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial and the treatment of detainees."

Amnesty International also condemned restrictions placed on Anwar's wife, Dr Wan Azizah, as "blatant political intimidation", and criticized the ban on all further 'pro-reform' rallies which it said contravened internationally guaranteed rights to freedom of speech and assembly.

"Prime Minister Mahathir should be upholding the rights of all Malaysians to peacefully express their views, rather than tarnishing Malaysia's image by using the law to his political agenda," the organization said.

Amnesty International has documented aggressive questioning of ISA detainees in the past. This included sleep deprivation, threats and slaps, and prisoners being forced to stand for long periods of time under excessively cold air-conditioners. To allay concerns about possible ill-treatment, Amnesty International is urging that they be given immediate access to independent lawyers, medical personnel and family members.

BACKGROUND:

The ISA allows the police to detain without warrant, for an investigation period of up to 60 days, any person suspected of threatening the national security or economic life of Malaysia. The Minister of Home Affairs (currently Dr Mahathir) may subsequently, and without reference to the courts, issue a detention order of up to two years, renewable indefinitely.

Amnesty International has long-standing concerns that the Malaysian government has used existing restrictive legislation, including the ISA, the Sedition Act and the Printing Presses & Publications Act, to curb freedom of expression. Dissenting political voices, NGO workers and other are all vulnerable to prosecution and imprisonment for peacefully expressing their opinion.

Recent events in Malaysia come on top of other prominent cases involving the government's selective application of restrictive laws and apparent misuse of judicial procedures, in particular the imprisonment of opposition parliamentarian and prisoner of conscience Lim Guan Eng, now entering the fourth week of a 18-month sentence, for sedition and printing 'false news', and the trial of women's rights activist Irene Fernandez, charged for publishing 'false news' about the ill-treatment of detainees in camps for migrant workers.

Amnesty International believes these cases and the recent ISA arrests will intensify the chilling effect on freedom of expression in Malaysia as those in power signal that the space for dissenting political opinion is limited, and that the penalties for alleged transgressions are severe.

The 14 political associates Amnesty International also considers as prisoners of conscience are:

Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) Youth Chief
Ruslan Kassim, President of Negri Sembilan state UMNO Youth
Tamunif Mokhtar, Division Head of Cheras state UMNO
Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman, President of ABIM (a Muslim youth organisation)
Mukhtar Redhuan, Deputy President ABIM
Shaharuddin Badaruddin, Secretary General ABIM
Abdul Halim Ismail, Deputy National President ABIM
Kamarudin Jaafar, Chairman, Institute for Policy Research
Kamaruddin Mat Noor, State assemblyman
Amidi Abdul Manan, President, National Muslim Students Association
Prof. Dr. Siddiq Baba, Student Affairs Rector, International Islamic University
Ahmad Shabrini Mohamad Sidek, Sec-Gen of the National Muslim Students Association
Asmon Ismail, State assemblyman for Pantii
Dr Zamri Abdul Kadir, Head, Lumut state UMNO Youth

Amnesty International also considers as prisoners of conscience two of Anwar's associates -- Sukma Darmawan and Munawar Ahmad Aness, who were sentenced to six months in jail for sodomy, after a trial which raises concerns about its fairness.

The organization is also calling for a prompt and fair trial for businessman and Anwar associate S Nallakarupan, who is facing charges of illegally possessing ammunition after being arrested under the ISA in July.

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