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Malaysia: Legislation and the erosion of human rights

The events of the past year in Malaysia demonstrate the degree to which safeguards protecting human rights have been consistently weakened over many years, Amnesty International said today in a major new report.

"Step by step, the Malaysian Government has undermined constitutional protection, weakened key institutions, and put in place an array of restrictive laws that stifle public debate and dissent," Amnesty International said.

Vaguely worded security legislation allowing detention without charge or trial is used to detain persons on account of their peaceful religious or political beliefs, some of whom have been ill-treated while held in incommunicado detention.

"Anwar Ibrahim -- a prisoner of conscience, whose ill-treatment and unfair trial are documented in this report -- is just the latest in a long line of people jailed for their peaceful criticism of the government," the human rights organization added.

Individuals have been sentenced to imprisonment for peaceful criticism of authorities. Reports of beatings and ill-treatment in detention are common, and for the most part, have not been investigated by authorities. Peaceful protesters have been detained and made to face lengthy trials, simply for being present at an unauthorized assembly.

Irene Fernandez, head of the non-governmental organization, Tenaganita, is currently facing trial for publishing a report alleging medical negligence and abuse in detention camps; Lim Guan Eng, a former opposition parliamentarian, was imprisoned and disbarred as a member of parliament for expressing his opinion and fulfilling his duties as a parliamentarian.

Provisions of restrictive laws, including the Internal Security Act, the Sedition Act, the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Societies Act and the Police Act, have been incrementally tightened, restricting the rights of Malaysians to peacefully express their opinions, form associations and protest in public, free from the fear of arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment and imprisonment.

Amnesty International urges the Malaysian government to initiate a comprehensive review of key legislation and bring it into line with international standards in order to guarantee the fundamental rights of its citizens.

“As a first step, the Government should ratify international treaties with human rights guarantees, and ensure its new Human Rights Commission is sufficiently independent and empowered to uphold those rights”, the organization said.

The human rights organization is also urging the Government to lift sanctions immediately and unconditionally against anyone who has been penalized on account of their peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of belief, opinion, expression and association.

"Many Malaysians have come to question the degree to which their basic rights have been compromised in the name of stability and development. By creating the political space needed to contend with emerging social and economic problems, human rights protection is the very basis of genuine and sustainable development."

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For more information or to receive a copy of the report, *Malaysia, Human Rights Undermined: Restrictive Laws in a Parliamentary Democracy*, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>