

3 August 2000

AI Index ASA 28/008/2000 - News Service Nr. 148

Malaysia: Authorities must respect human rights at rally to mark Anwar verdict

As fears mount that a rally to mark the verdict in the sodomy trial of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim may be violently dispersed on Friday, Amnesty International appeals once again to the Malaysian authorities to respect the right to peaceful assembly. The Malaysian authorities have declared the proposed gathering illegal, and have warned the public not to attend.

"The eyes of the international community will be on the Malaysian police on Friday morning," the human rights organization said. "We urge the authorities to ensure that no one is arrested or brutally treated solely for exercising their fundamental right to peaceful assembly."

Human rights activists, opposition leaders and supporters of Anwar Ibrahim plan to assemble outside the High Court in Kuala Lumpur on Friday morning where the verdict will be announced.

Police have also threatened to prosecute the rally organizers under the Sedition Act - a repressive law which allows for up to three years' imprisonment - and are said to be monitoring the movements of several opposition leaders allegedly involved in organizing the gathering.

The Malaysian Human Rights Commission also this week urged the authorities to respect the right to peaceful assembly, and has pledged to send observers to the gathering to monitor the actions of the police.

Malaysia's Police Act and Penal Code outlaws attendance at any unauthorized gathering of more than three people or five people respectively. Police permits are routinely refused without explanation, and offenders may be punished with fines and imprisonment of up to two years.

Since 1998 more than 1,200 people have been arrested for alleged illegal assembly or rioting while participating in public demonstrations in support of Anwar Ibrahim and reformasi (reform). Most of the demonstrations were peaceful, but police have repeatedly used excessive force during dispersal operations, including unprovoked assaults on participants with fists, batons and canes, in addition to water cannon and tear gas.

Additionally there are persistent reports of ill-treatment, including the beating and kicking of protestors, immediately after arrest and in police station detention cells (lock-ups).

Apart from the prosecution of the former Inspector General of Police, who severely beat Anwar Ibrahim in police detention in 1998, there have been no cases against police officers believed responsible for these assaults.

Prisoner of conscience Anwar Ibrahim is already serving a six-year prison sentence after being found guilty of abuse of power in 1999. He and his co-accused, adopted brother Sukma Darmawan Sasmitaat Madja, now face up to 20 years imprisonment if found guilty of charges of sodomy. Amnesty International believes the filing of charges against both men were politically motivated, intended to discredit Anwar Ibrahim and remove him from public life.

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