

Violence, threats rise as Malaysia election nears
MalaysiaKini.com
July 9, 2012
By Siva Sithraputhran, Reuters

A Malaysian ruling party politician suggests that an electoral reform activist should be hanged. Mock funeral rites are held outside the home of an opposition state leader. Eggs and rocks rain down on a political rally.

Malaysia is no stranger to political mud-slinging and scandal. But a ratcheting-up of inflammatory language and violence - much of it directed at the political opposition - has shocked even seasoned observers as the country heads for its most contentious and closest election by next April.

"I worry that the election will be the dirtiest. All indications also point to the most violent," said Lim Guan Eng, the ethnic Chinese chief minister of Penang state and a leading figure in Malaysia's opposition.

Members of Perkasa, a group that champions ethnic Malay rights and has links to the ruling party, placed a flower garland around a photo of Lim outside his home in May, a funeral ritual that his supporters said was akin to a death threat.

The rising political temperature coincides with signs that Malaysia's ruling coalition, in power since independence in 1957, will struggle to improve on its poor electoral performance in 2008.

That showing, which deprived the Barisan Nasional coalition of a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time, handed five state governments to the opposition and led to the ouster of then-prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

A source in the dominant United Malays National Organisation (Umno) told Reuters that recent internal polling showed the coalition faced an uphill battle to win back its two-thirds share and was even at risk of losing its simple majority.

The polls showed the coalition risked losing more states and faced a closer than expected race in southern Johor state - long an Umno bastion - due to waning support from ethnic Chinese.

"That will be a slap in the face. So this is why there is a delay in the elections," said the senior Umno source.

Polls by the independent Merdeka Centre show that while Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak enjoys strong approval ratings around 65 percent, his coalition is much less popular - polling at around 48 percent.

Najib has put off calling the election, which must be held by next April, showing his apparent wavering confidence in improving on 2008's performance.

"Umno knows their hold on power is not a given," said Ooi Kee Beng, deputy director of the Institute of South-East Asian Studies in Singapore. "Perhaps for the first time since 1969, there's a chance change may actually happen so you would expect more desperate moves."

The South-East Asian country was traumatised by race riots in 1969 following strong election gains by ethnic Chinese. The troubles gave birth to its current system of economic privileges for majority ethnic Malays over Chinese and Indian minorities.

'Relentless' hate speech

The opposition filed a police report against Umno lawmaker Mohamad Aziz after he asked in parliament last month whether leading electoral reform campaigner Ambiga Sreenevasan should be hanged for treason.

The lawmaker retracted his remark two days, but was not censored by the party leadership.

Ambiga, a recipient of an International Woman of Courage award from the United States, says she has received death threats. She has hired a bodyguard and installed security cameras around her Kuala Lumpur home.

The ethnic Indian has faced calls for her Malaysian citizenship to be revoked and even been labelled the "anti-Christ" by the right-wing Perkasa group.

"The hate speech has been relentless," said Ambiga.

"The leadership could have made a difference but they don't bother. I'm very disappointed."

After Ambiga led thousands of protesters through Kuala Lumpur in April to demand electoral reforms, dozens of former soldiers and market traders camped outside her house to protest what they said was a loss of earnings from the demonstration.

Some performed daily "exercises" that involved pointing their buttocks toward her house as they bent over.

Those close to Najib describe him as gentleman who has no taste for gutter politics. But the opposition says his failure to speak out more firmly against incidents of violence and intimidation has encouraged extremists.

After the "hanging" comment in parliament, he reminded coalition MPs not to make statements that hurt the feelings of other races or other component parties within the coalition.

Asked on Thursday about the allegations of political intimidation, Malaysia's Home Minister, Hishamuddin Hussein, told reporters: "It is very real. This year we are living in a very politically charged climate."

The opposition's Lim, who spent 18 months from 1986 detained under the now-repealed Internal Security Act and another year in prison for sedition, said the policy had gone beyond "tacit approval".

"The acts are supported and condoned by Barisan Nasional," said Lim, who has complained of several other acts of physical intimidation against him in recent months.

Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition's leader who was jailed for six years on sodomy and graft charges he says were trumped-up, blamed Umno for an incident in February when a group of youths threw stones at his car in Johor state.

His daughter, opposition MP Nurul Izzah Anwar, said a rally in her constituency in May was attacked by men throwing rocks, water bottles and eggs, resulting in several injuries. It was one of several opposition rallies that have been disrupted, sometimes violently, in recent months.

It is unclear who was behind the attacks, but opposition leaders complain the police have failed to arrest perpetrators or quickly respond to the violence.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/203051>