

Taib gov't confines human rights lawyer
Malaysiakini.com
August 04 2010

ANTIDOTE Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud has overseen the brief confinement of prominent native land rights lawyer Harrison Ngau at Kuching airport.

protest against taib mahmud in oxford university london Taib was stung by a noisy protest against his human rights record at a recent appearance at a marketing event in Oxford, sponsored by his cousin and Tanjong Manis MP Norah Abdul Rahman.

The latest police action against Harrison is being interpreted as a form of retaliation for Taib's public discomfiture while in the UK.

Harrison, the former MP for Baram, was stopped by airport security while trying to board a flight to Kuala Lumpur on Monday. Harrison has been a thorn in the side of the Taib administration since the 1980s, when Dayak protestors began widespread blockades against logging.

He was detained without trial during Dr Mahathir Mohamad's 'Operasi Lalang' police sweep in 1987, in an apparent nod to Mahathir's ally, Taib.

NONE Harrison (left) had been on his way to meet other lawyers to discuss the Sarawak government's appeal against a celebrated High Court decision in favour of Dayak landowners' native customary rights (NCR) in Long Teran Kanan, Baram. He had represented headman Lah Anyie and other Kayan villagers in their victory against the giant IOI oil palm company and the state government.

The lawyer had also planned to attend a meeting of the so-called Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RPSO) in Kuala Lumpur, a forum between corporate palm oil interests and NGOs, established by the palm oil industry. The much vilified IOI is a founder-member of the RPSO.

According to local land rights NGO, Borneo Research Institute Malaysia (Brimas), when Harrison asked Special Branch and Immigration officers why he was being held, he was told they were "following orders from the top".

"After explaining to the officers the purpose of my trip, they finally let me go, albeit apologetically," Harrison explained. He was not arrested.

Over the past three decades of Taib's administration, immigration authorities have blacklisted a number of NGO activists and impounded their travel documents.

the antidote article long kerong sarawak timber logging samling 090609 04 Harrison himself had his passport seized in the late 1980s after high-profile campaigns in Europe against 'timber politics', the cosy ties between logging companies with Taib and his family, which had led to the loss of native land rights.

Harrison's passport was finally returned in 2003. But his movements in Sarawak and abroad have since been monitored by the Special Branch, according to Brimas.

"The state government is reverting to its old tactics of intimidating and restricting activists from traveling abroad," said Brimas executive director Mark Bujang.

"Also, a few of our activist friends from Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah are not allowed to enter Sarawak. This is clearly a violation of our constitutional rights and also breaches the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People which Malaysia has agreed to adopt."

The emperor strikes back?

Harrison told the popular blog Malaysia Today that the police informed him he was on the government's 'watch list', and that he suspects the police action was connected to the recent demonstration in Oxford. Harrison told the police he had not organised the protest against Taib.

bn supreme council mt meeting sapp sabah issue 190608 taib mahmudTaib's speech at the conference on 'Islamic marketing' at the prestigious university's Said Business School was meant to be an ego-boosting trip for the embattled chief minister ahead of upcoming state assembly elections.

However, the public relations coup turned out to be a public humiliation. Taib was forced to duck into the service entrance of the business school to avoid demonstrators against human rights violations, corruption and environmental degradation under his authoritarian rule.

Taib was clearly furious, and Harrison has speculated this latest police interrogation may have been part of the fallout.

Taib enjoys absolute power over the entry and exit of Malaysians in and out of Sarawak. The immigration restrictions had been formulated as part of the 18-point agreement at the foundation of Malaysia, to prevent better-educated Peninsular Malaysians from swamping Sarawak's job market.

However, Taib has wielded arbitrary power to keep political opponents out and to intimidate local human rights activists.

Masing's defence of Taib collapses

On July 27, the day after the debacle in Oxford, state land minister James Masing attempted to defend Taib, telling Bernama that the state government is always ready to engage with NGOs to discuss the Penan issue, one of the most infamous of native rights scandals.

james jemut masing“Protesting like yesterday was pathetic as we have engaged many times with NGOs on the issue of the Penan. We have nothing to hide and what we are doing now is for the good of the community,” claimed Masing.

Activists point out that NGOs have been victimised and harassed, with one example being the mass arrest of 15 Dayak NCR advocates on Malaysia Day last year, while trying to present a land rights memorandum to Taib's office in Kuching.

“Looks like (Masing's) pledge that the state government is willing to engage with NGOs is already beginning to sound hollow,” Mark concluded.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/139116>