

Malaysian Opposition Sacks a Dissident
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By Our Correspondent

High-ranking opponent of April 28 rally loses his Senate post

Malaysia's opposition has cashiered one of its highest-ranking ethnic Malays, removing him from his Senate post in apparent retaliation for opposing an April 28 electoral reform protest that turned violent.

Tunku Abdul Aziz Tunku Ibrahim, a distant member of the Kedah royal family as well as vice-chairman of the opposition Democratic Action Party and a founder of the Malaysian branch of Transparency International, is to be replaced by another ethnic Malay, academician, Ariffin Omar, one of the founders of the respected human rights organization Aliran, when Aziz's Penang-based term ends.

Mustafa Kamal Mohd Yusoff, the election director of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, which is headed by Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, is also being dropped as a senator, to be replaced by Syed Shahir Syed Mohamud, former head of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress.

Given Malaysia's always-volatile racial mix, it remains to be seen how the removal of a top-ranking ethnic Malay from the Chinese-dominated DAP will play itself out. Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak is expected to dissolve the Dewan Rakyat, or parliament, and call for snap elections sometime soon, perhaps in June, tea leaf readers in Malaysia say.

"Coming so close to the elections, it was a little unnecessary, but I don't think it is going to have much impact on the DAP," a longtime political observer said. "All political parties are the same in Malaysia – they don't like anyone to stray from the party line. Tunku Aziz is a straight shooter but while he talks of rule of law, he should have also understood he is no longer head of an NGO. He is in a political party which has its own rules and he should stick to the party line. That's how it works. I like Aziz but I think he was a little off in his remarks."

Aziz was careful to say after his ouster from the Senate became public that he had no quarrel with the party despite the disagreement over the rally. That should mitigate any lingering ethnic irritation, other sources say.

Prior to the rally, Aziz was roundly criticized by Pakatan Rakyat opposition leaders for saying the rally, which was planned at Malaysia's Independence Square despite a ban by the Kuala Lumpur government, would encourage Malaysians to break the law. Lim Guan Eng, the Penang chief minister and DAP secretary-general, said the Tunku's comments on the rally had placed him in an embarrassing position.

The rally, organized by a coalition of NGOs under the name Bersih (Clean) 3.0, drew a crowd estimated at anywhere from 50,000 people to estimated 150,000 people but ended in violence as protesters attempted to enter Independence Square, later

overturning a police car and battling with police, who responded with tear gas and water cannons, beating protesters as well.

It remains to be seen which side won in the eyes of the public. No polls have yet been taken to gauge Najib's support. A previous Bersih rally in July 2011 cost Najib 10 points off his popularity rating in polls by the Merdeka Centre, a Kuala Lumpur-based think tank. A poll held by a Universiti Malaya center between March 31 and April 15 – prior to the April 28 rally – found 49 percent of Malaysians would vote for the Barisan with only 21 percent opting for the opposition, with 30 percent still undecided.

In the aftermath of the rally, Tunku Aziz was quoted as saying that the Bersih organizers were "not a group of angels descended from heaven who are completely blameless." He later acknowledged to the state-owned news agency Bernama that the comments had cost him his position in the Senate.

"Yes, it is true that I will not be re-elected," he told Bernama. "It is merely a small sacrifice." He later told reporters in the Dewan Rakyat that he hadn't disagreed with Bersih's objectives, but rather its insistence on marching to Independence Square.

"I am not against Bersih per se, I think they're doing a marvelous job, because we all want free and fair elections," he said. "But what I was against and continue to oppose is the fact that, while they're organizing these rallies, you should not break the law."

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