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Singapore: Government critics, bloggers and human rights defenders penalised for speaking out

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the continued sensitivity of the Singapore government to criticism and alternate views of Singaporeans, which further reduces the space for activists, bloggers and civil society organisations in Singapore. In the past two months, political activists, a blogger as well as the LGBTI community have faced reprisals for their legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association.

In May 2016, six criminal charges were brought against 17 year old blogger Amos Yee for allegedly 'wounding the religious feelings' of Muslims and Christians under Section 298 of the Penal Code, which covers offences related to religion and race. He also faces two separate charges for not reporting to police under previous bail conditions. This is not the first time that the 17 year old blogger has been targeted by the authorities for his comments on a blog site. In May 2015, Yee was sentenced to 55 days in jail for mocking Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Under international law and standards, the right to freedom of expression is not limited to views that are widely acceptable and popular, rather, states must also respect and protect the expression of minority views through a variety of mediums, including views that some may find offensive.

In another incident, police questioned political activists Roy Ngerng and Teo Soh Long on 1 June 2016. The duo were subjected to hours of investigation and the seizure of personal electronic equipment in regards to their Facebook postings on a by-election 'cooling off' day, which prohibits campaigning a on the eve of elections. While the right to freedom of expression may be subject to certain restrictions provided by law, these restrictions must meet strict tests of necessity and proportionality. Cooling-off periods may be legitimate to protect the integrity and peaceful conduct of elections, however in this case, the two activists were singled out by the authorities and detained an unreasonable length of time. Ngerng claims he was detained for nearly eight hours by police. Amnesty International believes that these investigations may be politically motivated, as other politicians who have been reported for violations in the past have not faced the same level of inquiry.

The authorities have also interfered with the legitimate activities of LGBTI groups, through Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs warning to multinational corporations to ensure they do not continue to sponsor annual gay-rights event Pink Dot SG. In its statement, the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that it would not allow foreign entities to 'interfere in domestic issues', especially those deemed 'controversial' in nature. LGBTI people face high levels of stigma and discrimination in Singapore, where same sex sexual activity between men remains criminalised.

The Singapore government must create a safe space and refrain from interfering with human rights organisations, in particular LGBTI groups. In addition, the government has a responsibility to comply with the principle of non-discrimination and meet its obligations under CEDAW to change social and cultural conduct which discriminate on the basis of sex, gender or sexual orientation.

Amnesty International notes with concern the situation of human rights defenders and government critics in Singapore as they lack institutional protection, recognition and guarantees of human rights. Amnesty International urges Singapore to accept recommendations on repealing or narrowing restrictions on public discourse that were made when it came under review at the UN Human Rights Council on 27 January 2016.

We also call upon Singapore to respect, protect and facilitate the rights to freedom of expression peaceful assembly and association and to repeal laws that create restrictions that are not legitimate, necessary and proportionate to these rights.