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Malaysia: End harassment of key human rights organization

The Malaysian authorities' are targeting a prominent human rights organization in what appears to be politically motivated harassment, Amnesty International said.

On 5 August Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM) announced that one of its volunteers, a prominent human rights defender, is being investigated for sedition following a fundraising dinner held on 19 July this year.

"The authorities' harassment and attempts to silence human rights organizations like SUARAM run contrary to their duty to protect and promote human rights. It sends a chilling message to human rights defenders in the country, and must end," said Isabelle Arradon, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

"The authorities should immediately clarify exactly why SUARAM is being investigated."

While the authorities have refused to comment on the specifics of the investigation, the dinner was held to raise funds for a court case pursued by SUARAM in France that relates to a corruption case involving the Malaysian government.

Harassment of civil society and opposition figures is rife in Malaysia, where the legal system puts harsh restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and assembly.

SUARAM has been a target of the authorities several times in the past what appears to be a concerted, multi-departmental government campaign against the organization.

Harassment has increased over the past year since the organization disclosed new information, which implicates Malaysian officials in corruption allegations. SUARAM alleged that the French naval defence company DCNS had paid bribes to Malaysian officials to obtain a contract for two submarines.

The SUARAM volunteer is being investigated under Malaysia's Sedition Act, which criminalises a wide array of activities, including those "with a tendency to excite disaffection against any Ruler or government" or to "question any matter" protected by the Constitution.

In July 2012, the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak announced that his government will abolish the Sedition Act, but this recent development only shows that the act continues to be in place.

"The Sedition Act is both outdated and repressive, and the government must stop using it to clamp down on the rights to free expression and peaceful assembly. Instead the Malaysian government should take concrete steps to ensure that the legitimate work of human rights defenders is promoted and protected," said Arradon.