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Indonesia: Editor's jail sentence threatens press freedom

Handing down a jail sentence for a libel case has serious implications for press freedom in Indonesia, said Natalie Hill, deputy Asia director at Amnesty International, commenting on the jail sentence imposed on the chief editor of leading news magazine, Tempo.

"It is only since 1998 that media restrictions have been lifted in Indonesia," said Ms Hill. "This sentence is a move back in time to a situation where journalists are forced to censor themselves to avoid offending powerful political or economic interests."

Two other Tempo journalists were acquitted of libel in the same case. But Tempo's chief editor, Bambang Harymurti, was sentenced to one year in prison for an article that alleged that one of Indonesia's most powerful businessmen, Tommy Wintata, stood to profit from a fire that had destroyed part of a textile market. The same article included a statement from Tommy Winata denying the allegation.

Bambang Harymurti is free pending appeal. Amnesty International hopes his prison sentence will be overturned by the high court. If imprisoned, Bambang Harymurti will be a prisoner of conscience.

The sentence against Bambang Harymurti contrasts with the court's treatment of alleged supporters of Tommy Winata who physically attacked staff in Tempo's office in protest at the article. One person was given a five months suspended prison sentence for the attack.

There are a growing number of cases in which criminal charges, including for defamation, are brought against journalists and others for exposing corruption, human rights abuses and other politically sensitive issues. Amnesty International believes that such cases are being used as a means to suppress freedom of expression.

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