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Thailand: Allow Press Freedom and Release Prisoners of Conscience

On World Press Freedom Day 2015, Amnesty International calls on Thai authorities to lift restrictions on media, drop charges against and release publishers and journalists penalized solely for their peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression in line with their obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The last year has seen dramatic rise in arbitrary restrictions on the media and the penalization of media workers in Thailand. After declaring martial law on 20 May 2014 and seizing of power two days later, the military authorities issued orders under martial law imposing blanket restrictions on media and prohibiting it from disseminating a range of information, including anything critical of military authorities. Authorities justified these restrictions on the media and its censorship of “distorted information” on the basis of the need to avoid public misunderstanding, or to protect the institution of the monarchy.

While martial law was officially lifted on 1 April 2015, the army retained wide-ranging powers, including to shut down media outlets and mete out punishment for reports that “create confusion, instigate unrest or deepen divisions among people.”

Monitoring and censorship of media reports either critical of the current administration or the monarchy, or perceived to be so, have increased. Authorities are continuing to suspend and shut down television and radio stations, and have intimidated and coerced media outlets to take broadcasts off the air, including by sending military personnel to raid and shut down operations.

During 2014 an online news journalist and a radio host were convicted and imprisoned after unfair trials in military courts, without the right of appeal, to sentences of ten years’ imprisonment for the peaceful expression or publication of views seen as critical of the monarchy. Media workers prosecuted under Article 112 of the Penal Code, the country’s lese-majeste law, have received lengthy sentences and repeatedly been denied release on bail during proceedings, at times lasting years. Authorities have characterized their acts to be of a grave nature and security offences in order to justify refusal of bail, and denied observers access to their trials.

Editor and prisoner of conscience Somyot Prueksakasemsuk has been detained since his arrest on 30 April 2011. In September 2014 the Appeals Court upheld his appeal against a conviction which led to a sentence of ten years’ imprisonment for publishing articles in Voice of Taksin, which he edited. The articles, edited but not written by him, included two fictional stories about an unidentified monarch and political figures. Authorities have

denied him bail sixteen times, including most recently in November 2014.

Editor Alan Morison and journalist Chutima Sidasathian, of news website Phuketwan, face up to two years' imprisonment under the Computer Crimes Act for reproducing a Reutersnews report on human trafficking on their website.

Amnesty International calls on Thai authorities to lift all sweeping and arbitrary restrictions on media, allow the peaceful expression of opposing political opinions, criticism and dissent, and drop charges and release all those charged, detained or imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression.