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Malaysia: Opposition leader silenced for another two years

"The sentencing today of a detained opposition leader to two years imprisonment under the Official Secrets Act (OSA) is part of a pattern which has a wider chilling effect on freedom of expression in Malaysia," Amnesty International said. "The government's selective use of repressive laws against peaceful political dissenters is a well established practice."

Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor, youth leader of the opposition *Keadilan** party, was already a prisoner of conscience, detained since April 2001 without charge under the Internal Security Act (ISA). He has now been found guilty of an offence under the OSA and will be transferred from an ISA detention centre to ordinary jail. Ezam is also facing separate charges of sedition and of participating in "illegal assemblies"

"The stacking up of charges under repressive laws has become a tool to silence dissent and is a serious abuse of human rights," Amnesty International said. "Ezam should be released immediately."

Ezam was arrested in January 2000 and charged under the OSA. At the same time other leading members of opposition parties, journalists and publishers were arrested and charged under the Sedition Act and Printing Presses & Publications Act.

During Ezam's trial he admitted to reading out at a press conference in 1999 investigation documents sent by the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) to the Attorney General's Chambers (public prosecutor). The documents, which had been mailed anonymously to Ezam, alleged corruption involving two senior government ministers. Ezam asserted that his disclosure was a duty and in the public interest, and his lawyers later argued that the contents of the documents had already been debated in parliament and raised by the media. No action on the ACA's report was initiated by the Attorney General.

"The use of the OSA today is a reminder that politically motivated detention in Malaysia can be a result of an array of vaguely worded restrictive legislation," Amnesty International said. Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Malaysian government to repeal or amend the OSA and other such repressive legislation and bring it line with international standards.

Background

The OSA imposes wide, often unjustified, restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, and on the examination and discussion of public interest issues by the political opposition and the press. By curbing access to such information, the electorate's right to know is curtailed and the means to public accountability curtailed. The Act gives vaguely worded definitions of what constitutes an official secret. It gives the authorities wide power to curb and impose penalties on the unauthorised publication of any

information in the hands of the government, no matter how insignificant or whether such information is already in the public domain.

With a mandatory punishment of least one year to a maximum of seven years imprisonment, the Act continues to have an intimidating effect on freedom of expression within the media, political opposition and wider civil society.

**Keadilan* is headed by Dr Wan Azizah, wife of jailed former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Public Document

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