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Singapore: Amnesty International to monitor defamation appeal of opposition party member Tang Liang Hong

An Amnesty International representative, Hong Kong-based barrister Gerard McCoy (Q.C.), is to attend the appeal of opposition Workers' Party former parliamentary candidate Tang Liang Hong beginning on Monday 22 September at the Singapore Court of Appeal.

Tang is appealing against court awards totalling US\$5.65 million made against him for allegedly defaming Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and other senior members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) during the January 1997 election campaign.

Amnesty International is concerned at reports that the Singapore government has used civil defamation suits against political opponents in a manner that violates their right to freely hold and peacefully express their convictions, and which prevents them from acting in public life.

The human rights organization also sent an observer to the trial in August of Workers Party leader J B Jeyaretnam who was alleged to have defamed senior PAP members by referring publicly to police reports filed against them by Tang Liang Hong. If substantial damages are awarded against Jeyaretnam he faces bankruptcy and subsequent disqualification from parliament.

Background

During the January 1997 election campaign opposition candidate Tang Liang Hong (61), a previously little-known ethnic Chinese lawyer and educationalist, was publicly accused by senior PAP members of being "anti-Christian" and a "Chinese chauvinist". In light of Singapore's acute sensitivity to maintaining racial and religious harmony, the charges were very serious. Tang reportedly received a number of written and telephoned death threats, and filed two police reports against Goh, Lee and other PAP members accusing them of making false statements and of inciting religious groups to hate him. In the subsequent elections the PAP won 81 of 83 seats. Tang lost in his constituency – but his party gained 45% of the constituency votes.

After the elections Goh, Lee and other PAP members filed 13 civil suits against Tang for defaming them through the police reports. Tang left Singapore citing concern at the death threats and the need to arrange his affairs for his legal defence. Pending a judgement on the suits the courts ordered the freezing of US\$7.9 million of Tang's assets. His wife's passport was temporarily confiscated as tax investigations into the family's business affairs were stepped up.

In March Tang, who remained outside Singapore, was found liable for defamation and in May Judge Chao Hick Tin awarded the plaintiffs US\$5.65 million damages. Judge Chao stated that 'this court must show its indignation at the injury inflicted on the plaintiffs'. An arrest warrant for Tang was also issued after inland revenue officials charged him with 33 counts of allegedly evading tax on income.

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