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Singapore: Government misusing the law to muzzle critics

Amnesty International called on the Singapore government to stop using restrictive laws and defamation suits to muzzle critics and opposition party members. Dr Chee Soon Juan, Secretary General of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), is in his third week of imprisonment having been convicted of speaking in public without a permit.

Amnesty International is concerned about the continuing use of restrictive laws and civil defamation suits in Singapore to penalise and silence peaceful critics of the government. Laws allowing the authorities to impose restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly which violate international standards, combined with a pattern of politically motivated defamation suits, have served to maintain a climate of political intimidation and self-censorship in Singapore. This climate continues to stifle freedom of expression, deter the expression of views alternative to those of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and dissuade many Singaporeans from exercising their right to take part in public affairs.

Chee Soon Juan was sentenced on November 23 under the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act to five weeks in jail after refusing to pay a S\$5,000 fine for speaking in public without a permit prior to the country's general election in May. In a video message before he was taken to prison, Dr Chee said "*...we need courage. Courage to tell the Government that no matter what it does to us, we are willing to pay the price to win our freedom and to establish democracy in this nation of ours.*" He hugged his wife and three children before the police led him away.

On 3 December Dr Chee was transferred to hospital to undergo tests after the prison's doctor found traces of blood in his urine and low blood pressure. Dr Chee had reportedly suffered nausea, strong headaches and abdominal pain. Due to his concern that his symptoms were being caused by the food he was being given in prison Dr Chee had refused to eat prison food since 26 November. He resumed eating while in hospital. Dr Chee was discharged from hospital on 7 December and transferred back to prison.

When Chee Soon Juan is released, he faces seven other similar charges. It is the second time this year and the fifth time overall that Dr Chee has been jailed following the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

Two SDP supporters were also jailed for speaking in public without a permit alongside Dr Chee. Gandhi Ambalan, who refused to pay S\$3,000, was sentenced to three weeks in jail. Yap Keng Ho was given 10 days in jail after refusing to pay a S\$2,000 fine.

Chee Soon Juan's sister, also a senior member of the SDP, Chee Siok Chin and SDP colleagues Monica Kumar and Yap Keng Ho, are subject to a court case after failing to pay S\$23,550 for legal costs incurred after challenging the move by police to disperse a peaceful protest involving Chee Siok Chin and three companions in August 2005. In order to stave off bankruptcy proceedings, Chee Siok Chin, Monica Kumar and Yap Keng Ho reached a settlement in November 2006 under which they will collectively pay monthly instalments of S\$800. Chee Siok Chin appealed for public donations. Chee Siok Chin ran unsuccessfully as an SDP candidate in this year's general elections but were she made bankrupt she would be barred from contesting any future election.

Other opposition figures have been declared bankrupt, including Chee Soon Juan and former leader of the opposition Workers Party J B Jeyaretnam, following civil defamation suits launched by prominent members of the ruling PAP. In November, J B Jeyaretnam made his fifth unsuccessful application to have his bankruptcy annulled.

Dr Chee, a recipient of the Defender of Democracy award by Parliamentarians for Global Action is recognised internationally as a human rights defender. A leading member of a number of international human rights bodies he has done research in Australia and the USA, and is the author of a number of books about human rights and democracy. He has expressed determination to continue to press for non-violent change in Singapore, regardless of the consequences to himself.

Amnesty International remains gravely concerned that restrictive laws and civil defamation suits continue to be used in Singapore to stifle criticism and debate, which is a clear violation of international law and standards on freedom of expression and belies the government's repeated claims that it is building an "open society".