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Malaysia: Stop prosecution of bloggers charged with insulting Sultan

The Malaysian government should stop persecuting six bloggers charged today for comments criticizing a Malaysian Sultan, Amnesty International said today. One of the bloggers has already pleaded guilty and been fined, while the five others face charges in Kuala Lumpur under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998.

The organization called on the Malaysian government to drop all charges against five of the blockers, and to reverse the conviction of one of the bloggers who pleaded guilty and paid a RM10,000 (US\$2700) fine to avoid being imprisoned for five months.

“This development is a serious blow to freedom of expression in Malaysia and has set a very dangerous precedent for people wishing to express their views on the internet,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Director.

The charges against the six come at a time of heightened tension in Perak State about the role of the monarchy and accusations that the government is trying to shut down discussion about this debate. Malaysia has a rotational monarchy, where the heads of each of the nine hereditary states occupy the throne for five years.

“The internet was one of the few venues available for Malaysians to express their views relatively freely, and now it looks like the government will extend its restrictions on free press to the web,” Zarifi said. “For a country that claims to be on the cutting edge of communications technology, this is a very troubling step backward.”

Azrin Mohammed Zain, 33, the blogger who pleaded guilty, is the first person ever to be convicted under the Act. He This is the first time the law has been used to charge people for comments posted on the internet.

Trial dates in April and May have been set to hear evidence against the five, who have been released on bail. If found guilty they could face jail terms of one year and fines of up to RM50,000 (approx. US\$13,500).

Amnesty International said that the use of the Act to convict and charge the six violates the Act’s stated objective that it would not be used to censor the internet. Section 3(3) of the Act states that nothing in the Act “shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet”.