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Malaysia: Deportation of Indonesian activist highlights ongoing pattern of repression against human rights defenders

The detention and deportation of human rights activist and Indonesian national Mugiyanto Sipin from Malaysia yesterday highlights an ongoing pattern of government repression against human rights defenders and other government critics over the last two years.

Mugiyanto Sipin was due to participate in a forum at the Yellow Mania festival, an event organised by electoral reform movement, Bersih 2.0, to raise awareness about democratic reforms in the country. However, he was detained by Malaysian immigration officials on arrival at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport midday on 7 January 2016. According to Mugiyanto, he was then interrogated by three police officers that said they were ordered by political authorities to ban him from entering Malaysia. The officers stated that his presence at the discussion was considered ‘political interference by a foreigner’. His deportation has denied Malaysian activists the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to access information through diverse mediums.

The barring of Mugiyanto from entering Malaysia violates the rights to freedom of expression, and to receive and impart information – rights guaranteed under international law and standards. It is also inconsistent with the rights enshrined in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (Articles 6, 17 and 9).

Mugiyanto Sipin is a senior activist in the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID). He was formerly the chairperson of the Families of Missing Persons Association (IKOHI) for 12 years and was a student leader in the anti-Suharto reform movement in 1998. He was among pro-democracy activists who were kidnapped by the Suharto regime and later released.

There have also been numerous other incidents in which foreign activists or academics have been barred from entering the country to discuss political or other issues, without any clear rationale that their presence presented any security risks. For example, in May 2015, Hong Kong student activist Joshua Wong who was involved in the Umbrella Movement was barred from entering Penang state, due to “security concerns”. In 2014, Indonesian Muslim scholar Uil Abshar Abdalla was also denied entry into Malaysia after the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (Jakim) raised concerns about his “liberal views”.

Malaysian civil society activists, government critics and opposition politicians have also had their freedom of movement restricted within the country. In December 2015, political activist Hishamuddin Rais was barred from boarding his flight to South Korea to act as an observer to a public assembly taking place in Seoul. Opposition parliamentarians Tony Pua and Rafizi Ramli, were barred by immigration authorities from leaving the country in July 2015 because of their criticism of corruption linked to state-owned development company 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

At various times, human rights lawyers and activists, Ambiga Sreenevasan. student activist Adam Adli, opposition parliamentarians Teresa Kok, Nurul Izzah Anwar and Rafizi Ramli have also been barred from entering the states of Sabah or Sarawak because of their political views or work. Amnesty International calls on the Malaysian authorities to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression, including by removing travel restrictions which violate their obligations under international law and to allow nationals to exercise their right to freedom of movement within the country.