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Singapore: Freedom of expression undermined in hearings on 'fake news'

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the treatment of human rights defenders and human rights organisations at hearings held by a Select Committee on deliberate 'online falsehoods' in Singapore. The organisation is alarmed by the criticism of and misrepresentation of civil society activists and organisations that have participated in the hearings, including the forced removal of human rights defender and political activist, Han Hui Hui, from one of the hearings on 29 March 2018. Amnesty International calls on the Singapore authorities to respect the right to freedom of expression and refrain from proposing legislation which may further stifle the free expression of views in the country.

The views of civil society activists and organisations were repressed over a period of eight days at hearings by a Select Committee on deliberate 'online falsehoods' carried out on the topic of 'fake news'. Amnesty International believes that the hostile treatment of the human rights defenders who participated in the sessions, the exclusion of one key defender from participating in the hearings, as well as government criticism of the international organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW) for refusing its invitation to appear at the hearings have shown how the public sessions failed to act as a free and open space to discuss on issues of 'fake news' in the country.

In the run up to the hearings on 'fake news', the Singapore government criticised Human Rights Watch for cancelling an invitation it had previously accepted to appear before the Select Committee. HRW has since said it declined the invitation as it did not believe that the government had invited it to participate in the hearings in good faith. Instead, it believed that it was only invited so that ruling party members could lambast its recent report on the restrictive climate for free speech in the country, which the government has rejected, but failed to respond to adequately.

On 29 March 2018, human rights defender Han Hui Hui was forcibly removed from the public gallery of a hearing of the Select Committee, after peacefully holding up papers displaying the image of a book titled "Authoritarian Rule of Law, Legislation, Discourse and Legitimacy in Singapore." Han Hui Hui had previously been invited

to participate in the hearings, but at short notice was disinvented. Amnesty International is concerned that she was deliberately prevented from appearing at the hearing due to her role as a well-known government critic, and peaceful defender of freedom of expression in Singapore.

On 30 March 2018, human rights defenders Kirsten Han and Jolovan Wham, both submitted complaints to the Chairperson of the Select Committee, expressing dismay that their contributions at the hearing had been misrepresented in the summary of evidence, the official record of proceedings. Both Han and Wham's statements appear to have been presented in a way that distorts their arguments that there should be no new legislation that would police or further stifle freedom of expression in Singapore. A veiled threat was also issued to Kirsten Han at the end of her presentation, in relation to an article she had written, in which she expressed concern about the restrictive climate in the country.

On the final day of the hearings, academic PJ Thum was subject to aggressive questioning for six hours over his submission to the Select Committee. The questioning, undertaken by Law Minister K Shanmugam, appeared to be used as another opportunity for the government to dismiss the views of peaceful government critics.

Singapore's hearings of the Select Committee on online falsehoods, together with the Malaysian Anti-Fake News Bill approved on April 2, 2018, could be the start of a deeply alarming trend of censorship if neighbouring countries follow suit. Amnesty International calls on the Singaporean government to ensure that any proposed legislation resulting from the hearings does not act as another tool to crack down on activists, journalists, and government critics. Any legislation proposed must be subject to proper scrutiny, and does not quash freedom of expression. The organisation also urges Singapore authorities to end its harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and allow for peaceful and open debate on 'fake news' and the exercise of freedom of expression in line with international laws and standards.