

Amnesty International Public Statement

Thailand: Record lèse-majesté sentences highlight growing extremes of repression in Thailand

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Amnesty International condemns the escalating use of Thailand's lèse-majesté law to imprison individuals with lengthy prison terms in military courts, in clear violation of the country's international obligations to respect and protect the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression and ensure fair trials.

The organization deplored the latest sign of the authorities' increasing use of the draconian lèse-majesté law to silence dissent as military courts in Bangkok and Chiang Mai handed down two record sentences of 60 and 56 years' imprisonment on 7 August 2015 and a Chiang Rai military court sentenced a 48 year old man to 10 years' imprisonment on 6 August 2015.

Pongsak S, aged 48, and Sasivimol, a 29 year old mother with two young children, were convicted and sentenced to record high terms of 60 and 56 years imprisonment respectively for sending six Facebook messages, perceived by authorities as offensive to the Thai monarchy. On 6 August 2015 Samak P, who has a history of mental illness was convicted and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for defacing an image of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. As all defendants pleaded guilty, the three courts halved their sentences to 30, 28 and five years' imprisonment respectively.

Thailand's lèse-majesté law allows for up to 15 years' imprisonment for acts deemed to threaten, insult or defame the King, Queen, Heir-Apparent or Regent. Amnesty International is concerned that authorities have used the law to imprison individuals for peaceful acts of criticism, and has made numerous calls for authorities to suspend its use and repeal or revise it to bring it into line with Thailand's international human rights commitments.

Since Thailand's 2014 coup, authorities have treated lèse-majesté offences as crimes against the security of the nation. Enforcement of Thailand's lèse-majesté law has dramatically escalated with increasingly lengthy sentences handed down, dozens of prosecutions initiated and sentences handed down. After the coup, authorities have placed lèse-majesté offences under the jurisdiction of military courts, which compromises civilians' right to a fair trial. Many have faced closed-door trials in military courts where observers have been banned. Until 1 April 2015 no right to appeal was granted to civilians in military courts, and even now an appeal must be made to a higher military court rather than a civilian one. Lèse-majesté suspects continue to be routinely denied bail, on the pretext that their cases are matters of "national security".

Amnesty International renews its calls on authorities in Thailand to ensure that measures they take to protect the monarchy comply with the country's international human rights obligations, including to guarantee, respect and protect the peaceful exercise of freedom of speech, including by repealing all provisions for criminal defamation. Anyone imprisoned for peacefully exercising this right should be immediately and unconditionally released. The organization also urges

authorities to end the prosecution of civilians in military courts, and transfer jurisdiction for offences by civilians from military to civilian courts, in order to guarantee the right to fair trial.