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Malaysia: Human rights lawyer on trial for sedition

As the trial of leading human rights lawyer Karpal Singh opens on Tuesday, Amnesty International reiterates its call for the charges against him to be dropped.

"The prosecution of Karpal Singh has serious implications for the independence of lawyers in Malaysia and their ability to carry out their duties free of fear of intimidation" Amnesty International said.

"The charges further undermine the already shaky public confidence in the rule of law and the administration of justice" the organization added.

Karpal Singh was charged under the Sedition Act in January 2000 for comments he made in court while acting as the lead defence counsel in the sodomy trial of former Deputy Prime Minister and current prisoner of conscience, Anwar Ibrahim.

Although currently free on bail, Karpal Singh faces a prison term of up to three years if convicted. A former prisoner of conscience himself, he was imprisoned without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 1987. He is also one of Malaysia's leading advocates against the death penalty.

A number of international observers are due to attend the trial.

Amnesty International has strongly criticized the use of the Sedition Act, and other restrictive legislation, to stifle fundamental rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly in Malaysia. In recent years the Sedition Act has been used to prosecute a number of government critics.

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