

Press release: Lèse majesté as pretext to silence critical voices

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On October 5th 2011, Kwanravee Wangudom travels to Geneva to participate in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN-Human Rights Council, when Thailand comes under review. She represents dozens of human and labour rights activists assembled under the "Article 112: Awareness Campaign" fighting against abuse of the lèse majesté law to silence activists and the media in Thailand.

The Clean Clothes Campaign and Reporters without Borders are alarmed to witness the increase of cases and threats against human and labour rights activists and journalists under the lèse majesté law in Thailand. The law restricts freedom of speech and freedom of opinion and is often abused to silence activists.

"The abuse of the lèse majesté law to silence media and bloggers that are reportedly form the opposition undermines seriously the freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The instrumentalisation of the lèse majesté law threatens all Thai-citizens, also activists in the internet, where they can be punished through the draconic Computer Crime Act law", says Thérèse Obrecht Hodler, president of Reporters without Borders Switzerland.

Ineke Zeldenrust from the Clean Clothes Campaign adds: *"In a climate of fear, where politically active citizens risk a lawsuit under lèse majesté law if they speak out for worker's rights, unions also can come under attack and face difficulties in exercising their legitimate rights effectively."*

During her stay in Geneva, Kwanravee Wangudom will talk about the case of Somyot Pruksakaemsuk, the subject of the "Free Somyot-campaign". Despite worldwide protests and calls to drop the charges and release him, the journalist and human rights activist has been inside prison for five months and has been denied bail despite repeated requests from his lawyer. The trial will only start in November, and will continue for the following six months. It has been announced that he will be moved to different provincial prison where, as a political activist imprisoned under lese majeste he may face particular ill-treatment. Somyot risks 12 years of imprisonment.

Somyot has worked with the CCC on numerous campaigns and Urgent Appeals. He was arrested on 30 April 2011, allegedly because he had published in his earlier function as editor of the magazine 'Voice of Taksin', 2010 articles reportedly breaking the lèse majesté law. However, just before his arrest, on 28 April 2011, Somyot had publicly launched a petition calling for the removal of lèse majesté from the Thai criminal code. It seems therefore likely that it was this that prompted his arrest.

Estimates are that there have been more than 300 lèse-majesté cases between 2006 and 2010 an increase of over 1000 percent since the military coup in 2006. Previously there was an estimated five or six cases a year. Currently, several dozen cases are still pending. On 28th July 2011, the Human Rights Committee of the UN issued its comments on freedoms of opinion and expression, where the Committee "reaffirms the central importance for all human rights of the freedom of expression and sets out the very strict parameters within which the right can be restricted by states" and "expresses concern regarding laws on such matters as, lese majeste."

The Clean Clothes Campaign urges the Thai Authorities to grant Somyot bail in order that he can fairly and adequately prepare his defense, as accords his human rights, articulated in Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and to drop all charges against him.

More information:

Internet-Blog: <http://freesomyot.wordpress.com>

Kwanravee Wangudom is a graduate of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University, The Hague, The Netherlands (Masters in Human Rights, Development and Social Justice).

Currently, she is working as a lecturer at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace, Mahidol University, Thailand. She is a core member of People's Information Center: April - May 2010 (PIC), a group consisting of academics and lawyers and activists focusing on fact-finding of the last year's government crackdown on red shirt demonstrators. She is also a core member of a group, called "Article 112" and a member of the "Free-Somyot-Kampagne", that works to raise awareness about the problems with lese majeste law and related Computer Crime Act.

The Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) works for the betterment of the working conditions in the global garment industry. The CCC works with 250 partner organizations worldwide and has national campaigns in 15 European countries.