

AI INDEX: ASA 28/08/99
25 August 1999

Malaysia: Lim Guan Eng released but his civil rights remain curtailed

Today's release of Lim Guan Eng -- a leading opposition figure and former parliamentarian -- after serving two-thirds of an 18 month sentence for "exciting public disaffection with the administration of justice" and "publishing false news" is welcomed by Amnesty International.

"We are delighted at the news of the release," Amnesty International said. "Lim Guan Eng was a prisoner of conscience who should never have been imprisoned in the first place. He was held simply for expressing his opinion and fulfilling his duties as a parliamentarian."

"Lim Guan Eng's case clearly demonstrates how the use of restrictive laws -- such as the Sedition Act and the Printing Presses and Publications Act -- pose a threat to freedom of expression in Malaysia," the human rights organization added.

As a result of his conviction, Lim Guan Eng has been disqualified from parliament and also barred from pursuing his profession as an accountant. He was released on the grounds of "good behaviour".

The human rights organization is calling on the authorities to restore his full civil rights so that he may be reinstated as a parliamentarian and work again as an accountant.

Background

Lim Guan Eng, former member of parliament for Kota Melaka (Malacca) and Deputy Secretary-General of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) was convicted in April 1997 under the Sedition Act and the Printing Presses and Publications Act. The charges against him followed his public criticism of the Malaysian Government's handling of allegations of statutory rape made against the former Chief Minister of Malacca, Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik, in 1994.

In 1994 Malaysian newspapers carried stories that Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik was alleged to have had sex with a 15-year-old schoolgirl. Under Malaysian law sexual intercourse with a minor, with or without consent, constitutes statutory rape.

The authorities decided not to prosecute Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik, while the girl was taken into "protective custody" for questioning by the police. She was later transferred by the courts to a rehabilitation centre for "wayward girls" for three years, despite continued efforts by her grandmother to secure her release. She later gave birth at the centre.

Lim Guan Eng's statements had reflected widespread public disquiet over the case and the fact that the underage victim, not the alleged perpetrator, appeared to have been punished.

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