

AI Index ASA 36/01/99
4 February 1999

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Defending free speech: Opposition politician Chee Soon Juan imprisoned in Singapore

Amnesty International today expressed serious concern at the seven day imprisonment of Dr Chee Soon Juan, Secretary-General of the opposition Singaporean Democratic Party (SDP), for “speaking in public without a licence”.

“Chee Soon Juan’s case shows once again how an array of laws continues to undermine Singaporeans’ right to freedom of expression,” said Amnesty International today.

“It represents far more than a dispute over the procedural requirements of a public entertainment ordinance. This case marks a rare public protest at the restrictive laws which deter people from expressing dissenting political views in Singapore, and engender a pervasive climate of self-censorship.”

Chee Soon Juan, 36, began his prison sentence on 2 February 1999 after being convicted under the Public Entertainments Act for giving an unlicensed speech in public in late December 1998. He refused to pay the Singapore \$1,400 (US \$830) fine imposed, and was remanded to custody for seven days instead.

Dr Chee defended his actions on the basis that the legislation under which he was sentenced violates his constitutional right to free speech. He faces a second charge on 9 February 1999 for speaking in public without a licence in early January, when his speech in Singapore’s business centre drew crowds of 600.

Singapore’s Public Entertainments Act requires police permission for public events involving more than five people. Opposition politicians have repeatedly complained that such permission is frequently denied or delayed until the last minute, thereby hampering free public expression of political opinion.

Background

The course of Chee Soon Juan’s political career has raised concerns that the Singaporean authorities use a variety of means to curb and deter the free expression of peaceful dissenting opinion - including the application of restrictive legislation and civil defamation suits. After Dr Chee ran unsuccessfully as an opposition parliamentary candidate in 1993 he was dismissed from his post in the Psychology Department of the National University of Singapore, for alleged irregularities involving his use of research funds. He was also sued by his department chairman, a ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) parliamentarian, for making allegedly defamatory remarks and ordered to pay S\$315,000 in damages.

In November 1995 he was censured by Parliament for not contradicting criticisms or statements by fellow panellists at a forum in the United States, who allegedly attacked the judiciary in Singapore. In December 1996 Chee and other party members were fined by Parliament for perjury, after they were accused of fabricating statistics in a parliamentary committee examining government health care subsidies.

ENDS...\