

AI INDEX: ASA 36/02/97

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Singapore: Amnesty International to monitor trial of opposition leader J B Jeyaretnam

An Amnesty International representative, Judge Paul Bentley from Canada, is to attend the trial of Singapore opposition leader J B Jeyaretnam beginning on Monday 18th August 1997. Paul Bentley is a former President of Amnesty International-Canada. He is a serving Judge of the Ontario Court of Justice. Mr Bentley was engaged in civil litigation and refugee law for twelve years before being called to the bench in 1993. He has since specialised in criminal law.

In a series of civil libel suits, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister Lew Kuan Yew and other leading members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), allege that Worker's Party leader Mr Jeyaretnam defamed them during the January 1997 election campaign - in which the PAP won 81 of 83 seats. If found liable for damages, he faces bankruptcy and subsequent disqualification from parliament.

Amnesty International is concerned at reports that the Government of Singapore has used civil defamation suits against political opponents in a manner that violates their right to freely hold and peacefully express their convictions, and which has the effect of preventing them from acting in public life.

Background

J B Jeyaretnam, a lawyer, now 71 years old, in 1981 became the first Opposition candidate in Singapore to be elected to parliament since independence in 1965. In 1984 he was re-elected with an increased majority, but in 1986, on being convicted on criminal charges concerning alleged irregularities in the collection of party funds, was disqualified from parliament and barred from practising law. Jeyaretnam appealed to the Privy Council in London, at the time Singapore's court of final appeal, which ruled that he and a co-defendant had been "publicly disgraced for offences of which they were not guilty". Although the Singapore Law Society reinstated Jeyaretnam as a lawyer, the Government refused to remove the convictions as recommended by the Privy Council thus barring Jeyaretnam for five years from standing for re-election to parliament.

In subsequent years a number of civil defamation suits were filed by government figures against prominent political critics and publications. Recently, following the January 1997 election campaign, 11 libel suits were laid by senior PAP leaders against Worker's Party candidate Tang Liang Hong. Tang was accused of defaming PAP leaders by filing police reports claiming that they had falsely labelled him "anti-Christian" and a "Chinese chauvinist" during the campaign. Tang, who left Singapore after receiving death threats, was found liable for damages totalling US\$5.65 million.

Eleven suits were also laid against Jeyaretnam for allegedly defaming Goh Chok Tong, Lee Kuan Yew and others by stating during an election rally that "Mr Tang Liang Hong has just placed before me two reports he has made to police against, you know, Mr Goh Chok Tong and his people".

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