

PRESS RELEASE

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Southeast Asia Seminar Calls for Decriminalisation of Defamation

Participants at a defamation seminar hosted by ARTICLE 19 and AJI in Yogyakarta, Indonesia called on countries in the region to abolish criminal defamation laws and to reform their civil defamation laws to bring them into line with international standards. They also pledged to work nationally and regionally to combat the rampant abuse of these laws to prevent critical reporting.

“Defamation laws, both criminal and civil, are roundly abused around the region to suppress freedom of expression and criticism of officials and other powerful social actors,” said Toby Mendel, Senior Director of Law, ARTICLE 19. *“There is an urgent need to abolish criminal defamation laws and to revise civil defamation laws so that they exert less of a chilling effect of freedom of expression.”* *“AJI is committed to continuing to work with its partners, local, regional and international, to achieve these objectives and to provide legal defence to its members,”* added Heru Hendratmoko, Chair of the Independent Alliance of Journalists (AJI).

The meeting, held on 9-10 May in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, brought together groups working on freedom of expression and media freedom internationally, regionally – including from Cambodia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Timor Leste – and from around Indonesia. A key focus of the meeting was to develop a plan of action for groups working on these issues. The plan includes both regional and national-level activities. Key elements of the regional plan are to promote cooperation and solidarity among groups working on these issues and to further develop regional mechanisms for the protection of freedom of expression.

Key elements of the national plans are to:

- promote strategic litigation to narrow the scope of defamation laws;
- build strong constituencies of support to achieve legislative reform of defamation laws;
- foster awareness of existing legal defence tools for those charged with defamation; and
- build capacity among journalists to report more professionally so as to avoid falling foul of the defamation laws.

The participants also took advantage of the occasion to express solidarity with Risang Bima Wijaya, currently serving a six-month sentence through a visit to him at Cebongan Prison in Yogyakarta. ARTICLE 19 is working with AJI and LBH Pers, a legal group, on a constitutional challenge in Wijaya’s case, arguing that imprisonment for defamation is a breach of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- “Building a Regional Advocacy Platform”, a paper delivered by ARTICLE 19’s Law Programme Director, Toby Mendel to the conference can be downloaded at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/conferences/defamation-conf-paper.pdf>
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.

- AJI is an independent journalists' association that works to promote and defend the rights of journalists, including their right to freedom of expression.