

For immediate release – 6 April 2009

Free Speech Groups Call on Thailand to Repeal Repressive Legislation

ARTICLE 19, English PEN and Index on Censorship today expressed concern over the ten-year prison sentence given to Thai blogger Suwicha Thakhor, a 34-year-old father of three.

Suwicha was arrested in January and held in custody until his conviction on 3 April 2009 of lèse majesté for material he posted on his blog which was deemed to have defamed the monarchy. Defaming, insulting or threatening the king or the royal family is an offence under Section 112 of Thailand's Penal Code. Suwicha's lawyer has said he will apply for a royal pardon.

Charges of lèse majesté have increased dramatically since the September 2006 coup which deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. In January 2009, Australian writer Harry Nicolaidis was sentenced to three years' imprisonment but was later pardoned by the king. In February, an arrest warrant was issued for Thai-British academic Giles Ji Ungpakorn for his book, *A Coup For The Rich*, criticising the 2006 military coup. Giles fled the country to avoid imprisonment.

In May 2008, BBC Southeast Asia correspondent Jonathan Head was accused of lèse majesté after 'inappropriate photographs' were posted on the BBC's news website. Several issues of the *Economist* carrying articles about the king have been pulled from the shelves in Thailand. Paul M Handley's biography of the monarch, *The King Never Smiles*, has been banned in Thailand since its publication in 2006, and websites advertising the book have been blocked.

The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology claims to have shut down more than 2,000 websites alleged to have contained lèse majesté material. And on 23 January, the Senate set up an extraordinary committee to oversee the blocking of further sites, warning that over 10,000 could be targeted.

In a letter to the king of Thailand, ARTICLE 19, English PEN and Index on Censorship wrote: "This is an extremely harsh sentence. We are deeply concerned about the routine use of lèse majesté to silence criticism and dissent in Thailand. We ask that Suwicha Thakhor be pardoned, and that the Thai authorities repeal a law that is chilling free speech."

International guarantees of freedom of expression require public figures to tolerate more, rather than less, criticism. By providing special protection for royalty, lèse majesté laws breach these guarantees.

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