Singapore opposition leader jailed

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Singapore opposition politician Chee Soon Juan has been jailed for 12 days after a court found him guilty on February 24 of speaking in public without a permit and he refused to pay the S$2,500 fine. Chee has already served a seven-day sentence for refusing to pay a fine of $1,400 earlier this month for a similar offence. Under Singaporean law, a fine of more than $2,000 disqualifies anyone from participating in an election for five years.

Chee, the secretary-general of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), represented himself at his trial. "I make it plain--I am not on trial for a crime," he stated. "I am in a political struggle. What is on trial is the system that the PAP [the ruling People's Action Party] has created."

On December 29 and January 5, Chee held lunchtime rallies in Singapore's Central Business District as part of a campaign to challenge the government's highly restrictive undemocratic laws. His speech to crowds of about 600 included quotes from the Singapore constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech. He was charged under the Public Entertainment Act, which prohibits anyone from speaking in public without a permit. His SDP colleague Wong Hong Toy also faces a fine or jail for assisting Chee by adjusting a microphone and speaker.

The PAP has ruled in Singapore for nearly 40 years using crude and bureaucratic methods to stifle any political dissent. Opposition parties must apply for permits to speak in public but the permits are never granted. They are banned from distributing political videos, and using the Internet during elections to advertise their candidates. They receive little or no coverage in the government-controlled local media.

Chee faces another court appearance in March over charges under the Environmental Public Health Act for selling his book on political dissidents in Asia without a permit from the Health Commissioner. Such permits for opposition politicians are invariably subject to difficulties and lengthy delays.

Even during Singapore's elections, the right to free speech is severely limited. Chee lost his job as a lecturer at the National University of Singapore after he ran for parliament in 1993. He was forced to sell his home to pay legal costs when a defamation suit was won against him by his departmental head, a PAP MP.

After the last election, the PAP instigated defamation proceedings against Workers Party candidate Tang Liang Hong for publicly defending himself against PAP accusations that he was an "anti-Christian Chinese chauvinist". Tang lost the civil suits brought by the prime minister and other PAP members and was hit with a crippling fine of $US2.3 million.

Workers Party leader J.B. Jeyaretnam is also facing bankruptcy after legal suits were brought against him for speaking in defense of Tang. Jeyaretnam could lose his parliamentary seat if he is made bankrupt.

Singapore still has the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), instituted by the former British colonial administration, on the books. As in Malaysia, Singapore's ISA can be used to arrest and detain people without trial virtually indefinitely on the vague grounds of national security.

In October 1966, Chia Thye Poh, a former MP for the Barisan Sosialis Party, was arrested under the ISA and accused of being a communist. He remained in prison until May 1989 when he was released with a restriction order that disallowed him from attending public meetings, making public statements or joining or advising any organisations. He was never brought to trial and the restrictions have only recently been lifted.

The PAP has held power in Singapore since the British granted it self-government in 1959. Former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew ruled over the island as if it were his personal fiefdom, until he stepped aside in 1990. He continues to wield considerable influence in

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the PAP and holds the specially-created post of Senior Minister.

The party has been able to stay in office through a mixture of electoral payoffs and the systematic suppression of even the most moderate political opposition. Local big business and the major powers have backed the PAP for decades as a guarantor of economic and political stability on the island, which is a key regional financial centre and strategic port.

But as in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, the economic breakdown throughout the region is undermining the old political relations. In 1998, 27,000 Singaporeans were retrenched. The official unemployment rate has risen to 4.5 percent. The economy shrank for the last two quarters of 1998 even though the employers' wages bill had been cut by about 15 percent. Prospects for growth are slim given that four of its five key markets in the region have also contracted and there is weakening demand for its electronic products.

Chee is seeking to position himself to take advantage of the growing anti-government opposition among workers and sections of the middle class hit by job losses and falling wages. However, his program reflects the concerns of layers of big business that the PAP and its autocratic methods are becoming obstacles to the new demands of international finance capital.

He has expressed the view that Singapore's national interests are being harmed by the government's lack of accountability and its cronyism in the use of taxpayers funds for loans and investments. Appealing to big business, he commented: "To succeed in the 21st Century, we can't afford just to rely on our cheap labour. We need to compete in terms of creativity and innovation. We need to encourage different ideas."

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