

Free Speech in Thailand: WACC Scholar Takes on Prime Minister and Media Giant in Freedom of Speech Case

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Thaksin Shinawatra, in Thailand, has a lot in common with Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Both are dominant media and telecommunications tycoons, both are Prime Minister of their country, both are billionaires, each is reputed to be the wealthiest man in their country, and both stand accused of serious conflict of interest between their political post and their massive media business interests. Supinya Klangnarong, a WACC scholar, is locked in a legal battle with Thaksin Shinawatra's Shin Corp in what is becoming a landmark case on freedom of speech.

Shin Corp, the family business empire founded by Thaksin Shinawatra, owns Thailand's biggest mobile-phone company and Internet provider (AIS). It also has a monopoly on the Thai satellite communications business and holds a major share in the only independent television station in the country, ITV, as well as owning many radio stations. In January 2001 when Thaksin's political party, Thai Rak Thai, won the election, government-controlled broadcasting also came under his control. This is what some critics call the Berlusconiisation of Thailand.

Thaksin's control of the media goes beyond owning it though. Recently Veera Prateepchaikul, editor of the Bangkok Post was sacked and Rungruang Preechakul, editor of the weekly Siamrath, was forced to resign. This is seen by The Southeast Asian Press Alliance, a Bangkok-based press advocacy group, as just part of 'the government and big business' scheme to muffle, if not muzzle, Thailand's independent media'. Media activists and professionals throughout the region criticise the Thaksin regime for the erosion of press freedom and independence.

Shin Corp has also filed a criminal libel action against Supinya Klangnarong, the General Secretary of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform, CPMR. In an article, published in July 2003 in the Thai Post, Supinya wrote down what many already knew - the rise in the Shin Corporation's profits since Thai Rak Thai gained power in 2001 (a rise of approximately \$US 980m), might be a result of benefits to Shin Corp from the administration's policies, which would amount to a conflict of interest.

The owners of the Thai Post, plus three of its editors, Thaweessin Sathitratthanachewin, Roj Ngammaen and Kannikar Wiriyakul, are co-defendants with Supinya in the defamation case. All face a possible sentence of two years in jail. In a second, civil, case Shin Corp are now seeking a staggering 400m Baht in compensation. Supinya's salary is 12,000 Baht.

In June, a judge in Bangkok's Criminal Court ruled that Shin Corp could proceed with the case. The first hearing in the case, a bail hearing, has been scheduled for September 6.

Supinya says that though she is shocked at the charges and the judge's decision to proceed, the case presents an good opportunity for the court and the public to hear evidence on the conflict of interest issue.

At the same time, Thaksin's offensive against drug dealers has become a campaign of widespread extrajudicial execution by police-backed death-squads and there is a climate of fear across Thailand. Human Rights Watch reported 'unexplained killing of more than 2,000 persons, the arbitrary arrest or blacklisting of several thousand more, and the endorsement of extreme violence by government officials at the highest levels'. Amnesty International report on recent killing of environmental activists, and slow progress on investigations into 'disappearances',

deaths and injuries of demonstrators by Thai military. Thaksin was a high-ranking police official before entering politics.

WACC has written to Shin Corp asking for the case against Supinya to be dropped. (The letter has been circulated on the WACC e-mail list and is posted at www.wacc.org.uk). Supinya recently completed an MA in Communication at Westminster University, UK, sponsored by WACC under its Communication Leadership Training Programme. For more information about the training programme contact [the training secretary](#).

Links:

www.ifj.org www.ifex.org www.cpj.org

[Supinya Klangnarong Blog](#) , run by WACC