

Thai bookseller given jail term for royal defamation

BANGKOK, THAILAND: A Thai man was sentenced Wednesday to two years in jail for selling books that allegedly defamed the monarchy, the latest in a string of convictions under the country's notorious lese majeste law...



King Bhumibol Adulyadej.
(Attribution: www.kremlin.ru)

Thailand's Court of Appeals overturned a 2014 court decision which had cleared Udomsak Wattanaworachaiwathin of any wrongdoing in a case which stretches back nine years.

A bail request was set to be heard later Wednesday. The 66-year-old was initially arrested in May 2006 for selling two books that allegedly defamed Thailand's revered but ailing King Bhumibol Adulyadej during a protest in a downtown Bangkok park.

But prosecutors only filed charges against him seven years later, according to iLaw, a local legal group that monitors Thailand's lese majeste cases.

A criminal court dismissed the charges in March 2014 after ruling that the prosecution had failed to prove that Udomsak knew the content of the books was defamatory of Thailand's now 87-year-old monarch.

Prosecutors then appealed the ruling, resulting in Wednesday's conviction.

"The defendant's behavior has shown that he knew the book had insulting details about the monarchy, and he could not prove the two copies he sold belonged to other people as he had claimed," the judge told the court.

But the judge said she decided to reduce the sentence from three to two years because of "useful testimony" by Udomsak.

Thailand's monarchy is protected by one of the world's harshest lese majeste laws and the country's ultra-royalist military junta has significantly ramped up prosecutions since seizing power in a coup last May.

Under Section 112 of Thailand's criminal code anyone convicted of insulting the king, queen, heir or regent faces up to 15 years in prison on each count.

Earlier this month a military court jailed a 58-year-old man for 25 years for a series of Facebook posts that allegedly defamed the monarchy, a sentence that received widespread international condemnation including from the UN.

Reporting lese majeste cases is fraught with difficulty and media must heavily self-censor. Even repeating details of the charges could mean breaking the law.

Critics of the law say it is used as a weapon against the political enemies of the royalist elite.

Udomsak, a grey-haired man dressed in a long-sleeved shirt, showed no emotion as the verdict was read out.

His lawyer Yaowalak Anuphan they would appeal to Thailand's Supreme Court. "We are confident he is innocent, he really had no idea about the (contents of the) book," she told AFP.

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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