

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: ASA 28/5013/2016

Date: 19 October 2016

### **Malaysia: Drop travel ban on Zunar and other government critics**

The Malaysian authorities must immediately lift an arbitrary travel ban on cartoonist and political activist, Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque, (Zunar), that prevented him from leaving the country on 17 October 2016.

Zunar, an outspoken critic of the government, is facing nine sedition charges. This is in relation to tweets he made following a Federal court ruling on 10 February 2015, which upheld the conviction and five-year prison sentence of former opposition leader and prisoner of conscience Anwar Ibrahim for “sodomy.”

On 17 October 2016, Zunar was travelling to Singapore to attend a private forum via Kuala Lumpur International Airport. At the immigration check at the airport he was stopped by the immigration officer who informed him that the police had instructed them to stop him from travelling. However, up to now, there has been no date set for Zunar’s trial and he has been previously allowed to travel freely, even after being charged. A valid, lawful reason must be provided by the Malaysian authorities for this ban to be in place. To date, there has been no explanation and no reasons provided for this action.

Arbitrary travel bans against government critics are a blatant violation of the right to freedom of movement and association. Such actions also stifle the right to freedom of expression, all enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Under international law, everyone has the right to freedom of movement without arbitrary interference, as well as to freely associate with others and to express him or herself peacefully. The right to freedom of movement is further provided for under Article 9 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

Amnesty International views this travel ban on Zunar as the latest attempt by the Malaysian authorities to silence government critics. Since he was charged last year, Zunar has remained an outspoken critic of the Malaysian government, both at home and overseas, and has continued to use his cartoons to highlight/draw attention to allegations of corruption and the abuse of power in the country.

Other activists who have been barred from travelling overseas include Maria Chin Abdullah, chairperson of *Bersih*, the coalition for clean and fair elections, in May 2016 and Hishamuddin Rais, a lawyer and political activist, in December 2015.

Travel bans are a pernicious way to also hamper the work of human rights defenders and other government critics. To make the situation worse, even challenging these bans in Malaysian courts can be a tedious, cumbersome exercise that drains financial and other resources.

Amnesty International calls on the Malaysian authorities to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression, including by removing travel restrictions which violate internationally recognised human rights, are unconstitutional and have been imposed without due process.

The organization also reiterates its calls to the authorities to drop all charges against Zunar and others facing prosecution for their peaceful political activities, and take immediate steps to repeal restrictive laws such as the Sedition Act, Peaceful Assembly Act, Film Censorship Act and Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 or amend these laws thoroughly so as to bring them into compliance with international human rights law and standards.

## **Background**

Since 2009, Zunar's cartoon books have often been confiscated or banned from sale, his office and printers raided and his assistants harassed.

In recent years, human rights defenders, opposition politicians, journalists and academics have been targeted by repressive laws used to stifle dissent in Malaysia. Dozens are facing prosecution for peacefully expressing their views or participating in peaceful protests.

The right to life and personal liberty is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. According to Malaysian law, travel bans can only be imposed in exceptional circumstances, such as tax evasion, and if a person is bankrupt.