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Asia - South Korea

Judicial harassment

Criminal defamation charge brought against Japanese journalist

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Reporters Without Borders is stunned to learn that Japanese journalist Tatsuya Kato has been charged with criminal defamation over a story about the South Korean president's activities on the day the Sewol ferry sank in April, drowning more than 300 people.

Tatsuya Kato, who is the Japanese newspaper Sankei Shimbun's Seoul bureau chief, is facing a possible seven-year jail term.

The charge brought against Kato by the South Korean public prosecutor's office on 8 October concerns a story in the newspaper on 3 August with the headline: "President Park Geun-Hye went missing on the day of the ferry sinking... Who did she meet?"

Kato was interrogated by the authorities on 18 August, banned from leaving the country and placed under surveillance. Most of his story was based on South Korean reports available online whose authors have not been charged.

"We condemn the decision to prosecute Kato," said Benjamin Ismaïl, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific desk.

"Media freedom is not just a privilege for journalists but also the public's right. And this story concerned a matter of public interest. Regardless of its editorial line and its politics, Sankei Shimbun had a right to raise questions about South Korea's government and president, and to mention what seem to have been rumours."

"The news value of the content of these rumours and the newspaper's reasons for reporting them could be the subject of journalistic debate," Reporters Without Borders deputy programme director Virginie Dangles added.

"But leaving the courts to decide these issues on their own is dangerous, firstly because South Korea's defamation law violates international standards by providing for jail terms, and secondly because a conviction would lead to an increase in self-censorship by both South Korean and foreign media."

The decision to charge Kato was prompted by a complaint filed by an association of South Korean citizens that drew renewed attention to lingering tension between South Korea and Japan.

South Korea is ranked 47th out of 180 countries in the 2014 Reporters Without Borders [press freedom index](#).
