

8 March 2019

Singapore: Jolovan Wham under investigation for taking photo in front of State Courts

On 2 March 2019, human rights defender **Jolovan Wham** was called in by local police for questioning and had his personal mobile phone confiscated for allegedly participating in an “illegal assembly” on 13 December 2018. The “assembly” involved the human rights defender taking a photo of himself in front of the State Courts with a sign urging the government to drop charges against the journalists and human rights defenders, [Terry Xu](#) and Daniel De Costa.

[Jolovan Wham](#) is a human rights defender who has spoken out on a range of issues including the abolition of the death penalty, workers’ rights, and LGBTI rights. He has worked with other members of civil society to highlight issues related to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of assembly.

On 13 December 2018, Jolovan Wham took a photo of himself in front of the State Courts holding up an A4-sized paper with the message: “Drop the charges against Terry Xu and Daniel De Costa.” He left the site immediately after taking the photo and proceeded to share it on social media as an act of solidarity with the two human rights defenders, who are facing criminal defamation charges.

The police have been using the pretext of the Prohibited Area under the Public Order Act to target Jolovan Wham and have been spreading misleading information about his actions and intentions. Articles published by various media outlets report the police saying that the human rights defender had applied for a permit in November 2018 to stage the protest outside the State Courts on 13 December, and that he went ahead with it despite his application having been rejected. The police accused Jolovan Wham of having a “willful disregard of Singapore’s laws”.

According to the human rights defender, the above allegations are false. The permit application that he submitted in November 2018 was for a Human Rights Day event he wanted to organise outside the State Courts on 10 December 2018. The permit application for this event was in no way linked to the photo taken on 13 December 2018. Furthermore, his photograph in front of the State Courts was not a public protest, but an act of solidarity with two human rights defenders who have been charged with defamation.

Since 2017, Jolovan Wham has been subjected to judicial harassment for his peaceful work in defence of human rights. Most recently, on 21 February 2019, the human rights defender was sentenced to 16 days in prison after defaulting on a 3,200 SGD (2,096 EUR) fine for organising an indoor event called “Civil Disobedience and Social Movements” on 26 November 2016, and for refusing to sign a police statement when police refused to provide him with a copy.

On 29 November 2017, the human rights defender was charged by the Attorney-General’s Chambers under the Public Order Act for four counts of organising public gatherings without a police permit, for two counts of vandalism under the Vandalism Act, and under the Penal Code for refusing to sign his statements.

Front Line Defenders believes that it is a gross mischaracterisation to call Jolovan Wham’s individual act of solidarity an “assembly”. Front Line Defenders condemns the repeated and ongoing judicial harassment of human rights defender Jolovan Wham, which it believes is solely motivated by his human rights activities as well as the peaceful and legitimate exercise of his right to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Singapore to:

1. Immediately close the investigation, return Jolovan Wham’s personal belongings, and drop all charges against him, as it is believed that these actions are solely motivated by his legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Review its existing legislation with a view to eliminating its misuse and preventing undue restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Singapore are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.