

5 June 2020

Malaysia: Woman human rights defender charged

On 2 June 2020, woman human rights defender **Sarasvathy Muthu**, along with four other members from two organisations – National Union of Workers in Hospital Support and Allied Services and Parti Sosialis Malaysia – were arrested whilst peacefully protesting in support of cleaners working in state-run hospitals in Ipoh. On 4 June, all five protesters were charged and released on bail.

[Sarasvathy Muthu](#) is a woman labour rights defender who has been at the forefront of human rights movements in Malaysia since she was a teenager, by organising unions for oppressed factory workers so that they could defend their rights. In the early 1990s she co-founded Alaigal, a community based organisation in Perak which focuses on labour rights issues. As part of her work she has gathered and organised communities across various sectors, including plantation workers, squatters, farmers and workers, educating them on their rights and empowering them to voice their struggles.

On 2 June 2020, Sarasvathy Muthu and four others, V. Santhiran, L. Danaletchumi, P. Jody and C Subramaniam, gathered on the grounds of the Raja Permaisuri Bainun Hospital to peacefully protest the poor working conditions for cleaners in state hospitals. The defenders wanted to draw attention to the lack of sufficient protective equipment for cleaners and the risk of infection, particularly in the context of COVID-19. Muthu and the group of protesters had been peacefully demonstrating outside the hospital with placards for an hour before they were arrested. On 3 June all five defenders were released as the police were unable to obtain a remand order.

On 4 June 2020, Sarasvathy Muthu and the four protesters were charged by a Magistrate Court in Ipoh with obstructing a public servant and negligence in the spread of an infectious disease (sections 186 and 269 of the Penal Code), and defying the conditional movement control order (Regulation 7 (1) of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Regulations 2020), implemented in the context of COVID-19. The COVID-19 related charge carries a maximum fine of RM1,000 or imprisonment for up to six months, or in some cases both. The court granted bail to the five defenders after the maximum fine was paid for each of them. The next court date is set for 9 July 2020.

Front Line Defenders condemns the charges against woman human rights defender Sarasvathy and her fellow protestors, which it believes are solely motivated by their peaceful human rights activities and exercising of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Malaysia to:

1. Immediately drop the charges against Sarasvathy Muthu and her fellow protestors, as it is believed to be solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Malaysia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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