

The Osman Scandal

A recent report issued by the London office of Amnesty International cites the cases of 26 people detained in the Congo for three years. "No moves have been made to try them despite an announcement by the President himself last November that they would be brought to trial soon" said Amnesty.

Amnesty International does a great job spotlighting and fighting injustice in South Africa, Israel, the Congo and dozens of other "repressive" regimes the world over, and they are to be congratulated for this. Certainly it is scandalous that anyone should be detained for three years without being brought to trial, but the numbers of such cases is, mercifully small, and they only occur under dictatorships or "repressive" regimes. They couldn't happen in a democracy, and certainly not in Britain, the home of modern Western democracy. Or could they?

Tell that to Lorrain Osman, a 59 year old Malaysian businessman. He was arrested in London on 6th December 1985 on a warrant issued by the government of Hong Kong and has now spent more than four and a half years fighting extradition. He has been in custody continuously since then.

Lorrain Esme Osman is the former non-executive chairman of Bumiputra Malaysia Finance Ltd. and faces corruption charges relating to a billion dollar fraud case. He is charged specifically with receiving \$10 to \$12 million in bribes. However, the details of the case are by no means as straightforward as that. Mr Osman, who was living openly in London at the time of his arrest, has always maintained his innocence, and his legal team are convinced that he is being made a scapegoat for the collapse of the bank and to save the necks of several top Malaysian politicians.

Malaysian politics is nothing like Western politics; financial scandals which would bring down governments in the West are accepted in Malaysia with a shrug of the shoulders. Mr Osman is fighting extradition because he fears that if he returns to Hong Kong he will spend the rest of his life in prison. If he's lucky. If he's not lucky, the rest of his life won't be worth much. In 1997 he would be handed over to communist China where he could face summary execution, but if he is sent back to Hong Kong he may not survive even that long. There have already been two murders connected with this case; both victims were smaller fish than Mr Osman.

The governments of Hong Kong and the UK have also stoically refused to release more than 150 documents on the case, claiming that to do so would not be in the public interest.

Leaving aside these unpleasant details, four and a half years after his arrest, Mr Osman, who has not been convicted of any crime, has been consistently refused bail and continues to languish in London's Pentonville Prison. Pentonville may not be the most notorious gaol in Britain, but it is certainly one of the most unpleasant. It houses large numbers of alcoholics, vagrants and people with mental problems. Mr Osman is an ethnic Malay, yet since 1988 he has been forced to eat traditional prison fare (prior to this, unconvicted prisoners could have food sent in).

The original warrant on which he was arrested was ruled defective in 1989 and his legal team have made three applications for *habeus corpus*, all to no avail. Concern over his case is growing in Britain, and more than 600 prominent people including academics, entertainers and members of both Houses of Parliament have signed a petition organised by

friends and supporters. Yet Lorrain Osman could be legally freed tomorrow; all it would take is an order from the Home Secretary, David Waddington that he be released. And remember, Mr Osman, who has always maintained his innocence, has already served the equivalent of a nine year sentence with full remission or a thirteen and a half year sentence with parole.

This case also sets a terrifying precedent: today it's a Malaysian businessman on a multi-million dollar fraud rap; tomorrow it's a domestic "criminal" on a burglary charge; after that it's anyone they choose on any charge they like.

Most Conservative Party supporters look on the achievements of the Thatcher government with unstinting admiration, pride, even a certain awe. But there is another side to Britain's "economic miracle." Over the past eleven years, individual rights in this country have been curtailed more than in any other nation of the so-called "free-world." Ironically, at a time when the Eastern Bloc is shrugging off the tyranny of state repression, we in Britain are faced with, among other things, an unjust poll tax; restrictions on trades unions; attacks on the judiciary by the government, the press and pressure groups; restrictions on the right to trial by jury; attempts to revoke the right of silence and the presumption of innocence; and now, the nightmarish scenario of an unconvicted man being held in custody for four and a half years with no sign of imminent release.

Make no mistake, Lorrain Osman may be only one man, but he is the first of many. All true freedom loving citizens, whatever their economic status, race or political affiliations, indeed all true freedom loving peoples everywhere have a vested interest in his release. Lorrain Osman must be freed. And once he is freed there must be no more Lorrain Osmans. No one must ever be held in violation of due process, natural justice and common humanity like this ever again.

We urge you to write to the Home Secretary, the Right Honourable David Waddington, at The House of Commons, London SW1 and to the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Margaret Thatcher at The House of Commons, London SW1, telling them of your concern, both for the continued imprisonment of Lorrain Osman and for the tainting of British justice.

STOP PRESS

Shortly after this article was written, Lorrain Osman's status was upgraded. He is now a Category A prisoner. Cat 'A's are highly dangerous, men who would be a threat to the public, the police or the state if they were to escape.

In spite of his Hong Kong connection and Oriental ancestry, Mr Osman is not a martial arts expert. Nor is he a terrorist or a serial sex killer. And, as he has been behind bars for four and a half years without being so categorised, we can only assume that this is the result of political skullduggery.

It is clearly the intention of the authorities that Lorrain Osman should die in prison. We'd like to ask them why; unfortunately, this is a state secret. Lorrain Osman poses no threat to the security of the state, but any state which can act so capriciously and with total impunity poses a threat not just to Lorrain Osman, but to everyone who cherishes freedom, democracy, and perhaps most of all, justice.

Anti-copyright: this article may be freely reprinted in whole or in part.