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Blogger uses crowdfunding to fight PM's defamation suit

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BY AFP (AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE)

SINGAPORE - A blogger sued for damages by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Monday he had successfully raised fees for his legal defence in just four days through crowdfunding.



A protestor covers his mouth with a Singapore fifty-dollar note during a rally at a free-speech park called Speakers' Corner in Singapore on June 8, 2013

Roy Ngerng Yi Ling, a government health worker who posts comments on social issues, said 1,104 people had so far contributed more than Sg\$72,000 (\$55,700), exceeding his target of Sg\$70,000 when he launched the campaign Friday.

Ngerng published the transaction history of his bank account on his crowdfunding platform. Many of the donors registered comments criticising Lee and opposing the use of libel suits to silence government critics.

Singapore officials have long used defamation suits against printed publications to defend their reputations.

Ngerng was the first online critic brought to court by a Singaporean leader.

"Donations were mostly of small denominations, and ranged from one cent to two thousand dollars," Ngerng, 33, told AFP.

"I think it reflects the people's frustrations with the current situation," added Ngerng, author of a blog called "The Heart Truths".

Lee filed the defamation suit on Thursday in the High Court, where the typical minimum value of claims for damages is Sg\$250,000.

The prime minister alleged that a May 15 post by Ngerng contained statements accusing him of "criminal misappropriation" of public funds.

Lee had earlier rejected an apology and dismissed as "derisory" a compensation offer of Sg\$5,000 from Ngerng. The court will have the final say on the amount to be awarded.

A pre-trial conference has been set for July 4.

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Lee's lawyer said the post had suggested that the prime minister, who is the chairman of state investment agency GIC, "is guilty of criminal misappropriation of the monies paid by Singaporeans to the Central Provident Fund (CPF)."

GIC manages more than \$100 billion of the city-state's foreign reserves. The CPF is the state pension fund.

Ngerng said Monday that for now, he would not "actively solicit for more funds as the target we set has been reached" but indicated he may seek help paying any damages awarded to Lee.

- 'David versus Goliath' -

Eugene Tan, an associate law professor at the Singapore Management University, said the lawsuit has a "David versus Goliath ring to it".

"There is a sense that the people who have contributed either identify with his cause or feel that the questions regarding the CPF Ngerng has raised is worth some support," he told AFP.

Local media is tightly controlled, leaving independent bloggers as the strongest critics of the long-ruling People's Action Party.

Calvin Soh, an advertising industry entrepreneur, said Lee's defamation suit against Ngerng was a "PR disaster" for the ruling party.

"It's not just the sum; crowdfunding shows you market size," he wrote in a Facebook post.

"What if you have turned Roy into a symbol of the ordinary guy being bullied because you've pushed too hard?"

But commentators on pro-government blogs questioned why people are donating to someone accused of spreading falsehoods.

Media firms like Bloomberg, The Economist and the Financial Times have previously paid damages and apologised to Singapore leaders including Lee and his father, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, for publishing articles found to be defamatory.

International human rights groups have accused Singapore leaders of using financially ruinous libel actions to silence critics and political opponents.

The Lees and other ruling party leaders say the lawsuits are necessary to protect their reputations from unfounded attacks.