

28. January. 2019

Court of Appeal upholds verdict that banning one-man protests in front of the presidential office infringes on freedom of expression and plaintiffs are eligible for compensation.

People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) also has compensation decision upheld in their favor after appeal by police.

On Jan 24, the Seoul Central District Court rejected an appeal by the police against an earlier decision in favor of PSPD activists who were barred from carrying out one-man protests in front of the presidential office in 2016. The court upheld a lower court decision that the police should pay compensation to the plaintiffs for damages ranging from 500,000 to 1.5 million won. The court also ruled that the police violated freedom of expression and are obliged to provide compensation, due to their decision to block one-man protests in front of the presidential office on the grounds of what was written on picket signs. With the ruling, PSPD hopes that in the future the police will be prevented from instigating arbitrary restrictions on the right of citizens to freely express their opinions.

PSPD activists tried to carry out a one-man protest in front of the presidential office in November 2016, urging President Park to resign. The police decided to restrict the protesters to an area 200 meters away from the fence of the presidential office (on the other side of the Cheong Un hyo-ja dong Residents' Center). Police banned the one-man protests claiming that the phrase "President's resignation" on the picket signs could endanger the security zone. Seven activists of PSPD filed a lawsuit against the police on November 29, 2016, arguing that the police's restriction of one-man protests was a violation of the basic rights enshrined in the constitution, including freedom of expression.

The lower court stated that "It is hard to say that the contents the picket signs and the expressions used were likely to cause harm to police officers." The lower court also ruled that the right to one-man protests should be fully guaranteed since it is a way to realize the constitutional right to freedom of expression, and allows an individual to publicly display and disseminate ideas about the president. In addition, the court of appeal also ruled on the responsibility for compensation. Through this ruling, it is hoped that the police will be prevented from future instances of legal overreach in the public sphere.