

S. Korea acquits blogger of spreading false info

April 20 2009, By HYUNG-JIN KIM , Associated Press Writer



Park Dae-sung, an unemployed 30-year old, talks to the media after released from the Seoul Detention Centre in Uiwang, South Korea, Monday, April 20, 2009. A South Korean court Monday acquitted Park, a blogger, charged with spreading false information on the Internet under a mysterious pseudonym, in a high-profile case that sparked heated debate over freedom of speech in cyberspace.(AP Photo/Yonhap, Lee Ji-un)

(AP) -- A popular South Korean blogger, who was initially touted as an economic prophet for his dire predictions on the global economy, was cleared Monday of spreading false information in a closely watched case that sparked heated debate over freedom of speech in cyberspace.

Park Dae-sung, 30, an unemployed Seoul resident, was acquitted by the

Seoul Central District Court. Presiding Judge Yoo Young-hyeon said he could not see that Park "had the intention to undermine public interest" or that he "realized the contents of the articles in question that he wrote were completely false."

Park, writing anonymously under the pen name "Minerva" after the Greek goddess of wisdom, caused a sensation last year by denouncing the government's handling of the economy and making largely negative predictions.

When some of those, including the collapse of U.S. investment bank Lehman Brothers, proved correct, his online postings gained a large following and earned the nickname "Internet economic president."

Prosecutors accused him of falsely writing in December that the government had banned major financial institutions and trade businesses from buying U.S. dollars, and indicted him in January.

Media reports had said Park's posting prompted the government to hurriedly inject about \$2 billion to stabilize the foreign exchange market.

Kim Yong-min, a spokesman at the Ministry of Strategy and Finance, said he had no comment on the verdict.

The charge carries a penalty of up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 50 million won (\$37,500), though prosecutors, who have one week to appeal, had sought an 18-month jail sentence.

Later Monday, Park said that he felt grateful for the verdict and strongly suggested that he would keep posting articles on the economy.

"It was an opportunity for me to think about how difficult defending an

individual's right is," Park told reporters, after being released from a detention center south of Seoul, according to Yonhap news agency. "I feel sorry for causing trouble."

Asked if he would keep writing online, Park, dressed casually, replied, "There is no reason for me not to write."

Earlier Monday, he was present in the small, packed courtroom, but he did not speak. Some spectators cheered when the verdict was announced.

"I'm just happy," Park's mother, Kim Chun-hwa, told reporters while wiping away tears.

Park described himself in Web entries as a former securities firm employee with a master's degree earned in the United States and experience in the field of corporate acquisitions and takeovers.

But prosecutors said Park was an unemployed Seoul resident who studied economics on his own after graduating from a vocational high school and junior college with a major in information and communication.

Kim Yoo-jung, a spokeswoman at the liberal opposition Democratic Party, hailed the ruling and called it "a wake-up call" to the government to respect freedom of speech in South Korea - one of the world's most wired and tech-savvy nations.

Lawyers for a Democratic Society, a major rights advocacy group in South Korea, said in a statement that the government should never again detain an Internet user even for allegedly posting false information.

Park, whose identity became public only after his arrest in January, made some 280 postings on bulletin boards on a popular Internet portal.

His writings were sprinkled with jargon that suggested he was an economic expert, and his identity was a hot topic of discussion in South Korea amid the global economic crisis.

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