

## Judge acquits SDP five

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They have been hauled to court many times for staging protests and other activities in public, with a guilty verdict the regular outcome.

Yesterday, however, a group of Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) leaders and activists were acquitted of holding a procession without a permit.

On Sept 16, 2007, five of them had marched from Speakers' Corner to Queenstown Remand Prison to mark the first anniversary of a protest led by SDP secretary-general Chee Soon Juan at the World Bank-International Monetary Fund meetings in 2006.

The group, comprising SDP chairman Gandhi Ambalam, assistant secretary-general John Tan, central executive committee member Chee Siok Chin, SDP supporter Yap Keng Ho and human rights activist Chong Kai Xiong, also wore white T-shirts with the words "Democracy Now" and "Freedom Now".

In his written judgment, District Judge John Ng noted that the group had walked mainly on pedestrian pathways and did not attract "any significant" attention of the public.

They also did not carry any of the usual equipment associated with a protest, such as placards or banners, and the walk did not disrupt pedestrian flow.

The judge said: "It was a group of people walking purposefully in a public place from one point to another, but on this occasion, it never amounted to a procession."

He added that there has to be a distinction drawn between "walking in a group from one point to another, even if it was to commemorate an event, and being part of a procession".

When contacted, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh told MediaCorp: "The judgment suggests at face value that there are political activities that seem to be acceptable which we never thought would be allowed."

She said that political activists should look at the previous cases and the specifics of the judgment, and "they would want to be cautious in staging political activities in order to avoid running afoul of various laws".

The five SDP leaders and activists had been charged for participating in a procession without a valid permit. Each of them could have been fined up to \$1,000 if convicted.