

# THE WISDOM OF FREE SPEECH: FROM ALBANIA TO SYRIA

LE 5 OTTOBRE 2010 NILUCCIO

I somehow doubt whether Tal al-Mallohi and her fellow Syrian detainees have watched many Norman Wisdom films. But if they ever do, I reckon they'd get a glimpse of what Syria is trying to suppress.



This blog post first appeared on **Amnesty International UK Blogs**, and is by Niluccio, aka Amnesty International UK Press officer, Neil Durkin.

I've got to admit I was never a fan of Norman Wisdom, pratfalls and mugging not being my thing. But then again ... there was something interesting about his whole screen persona and his amazing success.

Was he a trailblazer for freedom of expression? Did he represent liberty versus establishment authoritarianism? Hmm. Charlie Chaplin, George Formby, Michael Crawford's "Frank Spencer" (!), and Norman Wisdom's "Norman Pitkin".

Apparently with Wisdom it was actually more than a screen construct. According to **Wikipedia**, when he was working in a telephone centre during the Second World War he came into regular contact with Winston Churchill and was once reprimanded for cheekily calling him "Winnie". Nice.

I can even see an echo of Wisdom's "Gump" character – tight, rumpled suit jacket and mangled tie – in the archetypal punk look (Johnny Rotten, **Richard Hell**). Maybe punk's anti-establishment postures unconsciously took something from comic rebels like Norman Pitkin. (*Please discuss...*).

And then there's the famous matter of his popularity in Stalinist countries like Albania and China. Obviously "physical" comedians like "Mr Bean" and Benny Hill have always travelled well, but with Norman Wisdom the adoption of the lovable rebel figure in authoritarian countries was also political. He supposedly represented something "acceptable" to Communist rulers about the supposedly corrupt, bourgeois West.

Which is all deeply ironic. Albania would apparently allow *only* his films from the non-Communist world to be shown in the country. Everything else was banned.

Present-day authoritarian countries are notoriously selective about what they will and won't allow their populations to watch, write about or do. For example, in Syria a 19-year-old blogger called **Tal al-Mallohi** has been in prison without charge or trial since last year apparently because the authorities are enraged by her poetry and other online musings which contain references to Syria's draconian restrictions on freedom of expression (see her **blog**: Arabic only).

There are new **reports** that she is being held on "espionage" grounds. We'll see. Please, meanwhile, take action for Tal **here**.

Syria has a nasty record of jailing people who dare to voice forbidden topics online – people like **Kareem 'Arabji**, a blogger jailed last year for moderating an internet youth forum (he's since been amnestied), and people like 'Allam Fakhour, Ayham Saqr, Diab Siriyeh, Hussam 'Ali Mulhim, Maher Isber Ibrahim, 'Omar 'Ali al-'Abdullah and Tareq al-Ghorani – all of whom have been sentenced to long prison sentences for their part in developing an online youth discussion group and publishing online articles advocating democratic reform. Please take action for these men **here**.

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