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Shaman goes too far

A campaign by a social media influencer to chase indecent monks out of Buddhism has turned ugly as he wrongly targeted a senior monk in the northeastern province of Yasothon.

Jeeraphan Phetkao, a famous shaman also known as Mor Pla, who is also a self-proclaimed guardian of Buddhism, now faces the prospect of legal action after the setback. Some media outlets seeking to sensationalise the story are also coming under scrutiny.

In recent months, Mr Jeeraphan has unmasked quite a few black sheep in the Sangha realm. He has conducted raids on temples and, sometimes, caught monks in the act of various misdeeds before media cameras. The campaign enabled Mr Jeeraphan, who operates a talisman business, to make his name.

Last week, the 44-year-old shaman again drew public attention as he accused revered Luangpu Saeng Yanavaro, head of Yasothon-based Dongsawangtham monastery, of harassing a woman disciple.

When he raided the monastery, the country was still in shock over the case of Kato, a young monk in the southern region whom he also exposed. He was forced to leave the monkhood following a high-profile sex scandal and alleged embezzlement of temple money.

Mr Jeeraphan produced clips showing the senior monk in dubious actions with a supposed

woman disciple.

However, subsequent events showed the clip was a set-up designed to frame the revered monk and damage his reputation.

The disciple in question turned out to be a reporter who disguised herself to lure the monk as cameramen stood ready.

Now the authorities are preparing to bring criminal charges against the shaman. The reporter was fired, while some others involved in the campaign have also been punished. Two assistants of the senior monk have been stripped of their duties. Meanwhile, a Sangha panel has stepped in, tightening temple protocols to prevent the recurrence of such incidents.

Health reports showed that Luangpu Saeng — who is aged 98 (or perhaps more than 100 as believed by those close to him) — has several illnesses, including the first stages of Alzheimer's, that may account for oddities in his behaviour at times. As such, he is a convenient target for people with ulterior motives.

Arguably, the shaman's campaign underlies the fact there are some unscrupulous monks about, just as state mechanisms for regulating monks' conduct and the Sangha body appear too weak, if not inefficient.

A spate of scandals, ranging from monks amassing wealth to other serious sins, has eroded Buddhists' faith in the country's predominant religion.

But this time the shaman went too far.

Also facing the music are those media outlets whose staff took part in the plan. Punishing individual staff, while a must, is not enough. Those higher up in the management chain should also show more responsibility.

This case shows some media agencies are trapped in a clickbait culture, as tough business competition forces them to seek higher ratings and secure ads and revenue.

As a result, they have placed ratings before ethics. This is not acceptable.

It's time the media agencies look back at what they did and start cleaning up their act. If they cannot see their problems clearly, regulatory agencies like the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission as well as umbrella media organisations should step in and give them a hand.