

URGENT ACTION

FIVE YEARS IN PRISON FOR TWITTER POSTS

Saudi Arabian journalist Alaa Brinji has been sentenced to five years in prison by the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh after being convicted for posts on Twitter. He has had no access to a lawyer. He is a prisoner of conscience.

On 24 March the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in Riyadh sentenced Saudi Arabian journalist **Alaa Brinji** to five years in prison to be followed by an eight year travel ban after he was found guilty of, among other things, “insulting the rulers”, “inciting public opinion”, “ridiculing Islamic religious figures”, “violating Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law” and “accusing security officers of killing protestors in Awamiyya [an area in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province]”. The charges relate to his posts on Twitter, some of which call for freedom of religion and support the “women to drive” movement, human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience. The court also fined him 50,000 Saudi Arabian riyals (approximately \$13,000 USD) and ordered the closure of his Twitter account.

The information available to Amnesty International indicates that Alaa Brinji’s trial at the SCC began in or around December 2015. He was initially charged with “apostasy” in addition to the other charges, which in Saudi Arabia is a serious crime that carries the death penalty, but due to lack of evidence this charge was dropped. He was not allowed access to a lawyer during the course of his trial.

Alaa Brinji was arrested on 12 May 2014 by members of the security forces, some of them in civilian clothes, at a checkpoint on his way to Bahrain with his wife. He was taken to the General Directorate of Investigations (GDI, also known as *al-Mabahith*) prison in Dammam, where he is still detained. He was detained incommunicado in solitary confinement for the first 50 days, after which he was allowed to phone his wife.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Calling on the authorities to release Alaa Brinji immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience, held solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression;
- Urging them to ensure that he has regular access to his family and a lawyer;
- Calling on the authorities to repeal or amend all laws that arbitrarily restrict the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 12 MAY 2016 TO:

King and Prime Minister

His Majesty King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud
The Custodian of the two Holy Mosques
Office of His Majesty the King
Royal Court, Riyadh
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Fax: (via Ministry of the Interior)
+966 11 403 3125 (please keep trying)
Twitter: @KingSalman

Salutation: Your Majesty

Minister of Justice

His Excellency Dr Walid bin Mohammed bin Saleh Al-Samaani
Ministry of Justice
University Street,
PO Box 7775, Riyadh 11137
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Fax: +966 11 401 1741 / 402 031

Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:

Minister of Interior

His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud
Ministry of Interior
P.O. Box 2933, Airport Road, Riyadh 11134
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Fax: +966 11 403 3125

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA 63/16. Further information:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/3673/2016/en/>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Alaa Brinji, aged 39, is a respected journalist who has worked for Saudi Arabian newspapers *al-Bilad*, *al-Sharq*, and *Okaz*.

The systematic repression of writers, journalists and human rights defenders is part of a larger campaign to silence all forms of criticism that have revealed, directly or indirectly, human rights violations committed by the authorities. People targeted have included the country's leading human rights defenders, such as women's rights activists, relatives of victims of human rights violations, dissident Saudi Arabian Shi'a Muslims who have criticized discrimination against their community and anyone who communicates with international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.

The Saudi Arabian authorities have systematically repressed all forms of peaceful dissent and activism since 2012 by targeting activists and dissidents. By early 2014, most of Saudi Arabia's prominent and independent human rights defenders had been either imprisoned or scared into silence, or had fled the country. Most of them had already been subjected to arbitrary travel bans, and had been intimidated and harassed by the security forces, particularly by the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of Investigations, before being prosecuted and given harsh sentences. Many of them were sentenced after grossly unfair trials by the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), a special security and counter-terrorism court whose jurisdiction and procedures are unspecified.

Earlier this month Saudi Arabian writer and Islamic scholar Mohanna Abdulaziz al-Hubail was sentenced in absentia by the SCC to six years in prison to be followed by a travel ban of equal length. He was convicted of a number of 'offences' including violating Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law by "insulting the state and its rulers" and "being in solidarity with imprisoned members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association" (ACRPA) on Twitter. He was also found guilty of inciting and taking part in demonstrations and calling for the release of prisoners of conscience. The court also ordered the closure of his Twitter account.

Having silenced the country's prominent human rights defenders, the authorities in 2013 expanded their repression towards online activism and to silencing of lawyers and family members of victims of human rights violations, or anyone contacting international human rights organizations to report violations. They forced family members and lawyers of activists and victims to sign pledges not to report abuses faced by their relatives or clients, and not to reveal their case details. At the same time, the authorities themselves used the state-controlled media to report their own version of events and to turn public opinion against these activists, in some cases going as far as labelling them as terrorists and criminals.

Name: Alaa Brinji
Gender m/f: m

Further information on UA: 63/16 Index: MDE 23/3744/2016 Issue Date: 31 March 2016

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