

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: MDE 24/010/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 046
2 March 2003

Embargo Date: 2 March 2003 00:01 GMT

Syria: elections opportunity to release independent MPs

The 2-3 March parliamentary elections will be the first since President Bashar al-Assad succeeded his late father, Hafez, in 2000. Amnesty International is calling on the Syrian authorities to encourage true democracy by releasing two independent members of the Syrian People's Assembly (Parliament).

Interior Minister Ali Hammud has said: "Candidacies are open to any citizen who wants to assume his civic responsibilities," and "We have taken all steps to make these elections a success by guaranteeing a climate of democracy which allow citizens to exercise their right to vote in complete freedom."

However, despite this positive language the reality has been quite different. Two of the independent MPs, Riad Seif and Mamun al-Humsi, have been imprisoned for their peaceful pro-democracy activities and are considered by Amnesty International to be prisoners of conscience.

"We welcome the Syrian government's stated commitment to free and open elections, but elected MPs Mamun al-Humsi and Riad Seif are prisoners of conscience and should be released immediately," Amnesty International said today.

Background

Mamun al-Humsi, aged 46, and Riad Seif, aged 56, are both independent members of the Syrian People's Assembly and businessmen. They were arrested on 9 August 2001 and 6 September 2001 respectively, regarding their peaceful pro-democracy activities. Mamun al-Humsi had issued a statement, accompanied by a hunger strike, calling for political and economic reform in Syria and denouncing corruption and the broad powers wielded by the security forces. Riad Seif had hosted a political seminar at his house in which calls were voiced for political reform and democratic elections. Both MPs had their parliamentary immunity lifted and following unfair trials in March 2002 and April 2002 respectively, both men were sentenced to five years' imprisonment on charges including "attempting to change the Constitution by illegal means". Their appeals were rejected, and they are reportedly held at 'Adra Prison. Mamun al-Humsi has been denied hospital treatment for diabetes and the families of both men have been subjected to harassment and intimidation by the authorities.

Public Document

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