

AI Index: PRE 01/388/2012
10 August 2012

Saudi Arabia must charge or release detained dissident cleric

Saudi Arabian cleric and outspoken critic of the Saudi government held in detention for more than a month must be either charged with a recognizably criminal offence or released, Amnesty International has said.

Sheikh Nimr Baqir al Nimr, 51, who has frequently criticised the Saudi Arabian government over discrimination faced by members of the Shi'a community in the country, has been held without charge since his arrest by Saudi Arabian security forces on 8 July in al- Awwamiya in the Eastern Province.

“It has been a month since his arrest and Amnesty International is not aware of any charges being brought against him. Amnesty calls on the Saudi Arabian authorities to either charge him with a recognisably criminal offence or release him,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“The Saudi Arabian authorities must also end what amounts to pervasive human rights violations against members of the Shi'a community in the Eastern Province exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly.”

Sheikh Nimr was travelling by car from his farm to his home about 1 km away when he was arrested.

He was shown in photos, which were apparently released by the authorities shortly afterwards, lying in the back of a car with what appeared to be a gun shot wound to his leg.

The exact circumstances of his arrest are not known.

The Ministry of Interior announced Sheikh Nimr had been arrested as an “instigator of sedition” and was shot at as “he and those with him resisted security forces at a check-point, opened fire at security forces and crashed into a car belonging to security forces as he sought to escape”.

However, his family said he was not armed, did not own a gun and was on his own at the time of his arrest.

Sheikh Nimr has been vocal over several years in calling for reforms in Saudi Arabia and for an end to discrimination against Shi'a muslims .

He has been an outspoken critic of the policies and practices of the Saudi Arabian authorities affecting the Shi'a community, including detentions without charge or trial, and excessive use of force against protesters.

Following the death of Prince Naif, the former Minister of the Interior, he was reported to have said, among other things: “Can't we be happy for the death of those who kill our sons? We can't be happy for the death of those who detain our sons? We can't be happy for the death of those who make us live in

horror and fear?”

His arrest is believed to have been specifically linked to these comments, as well as his outspoken criticism of the Saudi Arabian authorities generally.

Sheikh Nimr was taken to the Dammam Central Hospital 20 km away shortly after his arrest. Hours later he was taken to al-Dhahran Military Hospital in al-Dhahran, Eastern Province.

His family told Amnesty International they had been worried about him following his arrest, and also after seeing the photos of his injury, as they had been given no information about his well-being.

They said they were not allowed by security officials to see him or talk to him in hospital until mid-July, when they were allowed to see him for only about 15 minutes.

Security forces are reported to be present both in and outside his hospital room.

His family saw him again for about 15 minutes around 23 July, but has not been allowed to visit him since his transfer to Security Forces Hospital in Riyadh the next day.

Protesters face crackdown by security forces

Demonstrations are banned in Saudi Arabia, where the vast majority of the population are Sunni Muslims and the official creed of the state is the Wahhabi doctrine of Islam.

The authorities consider Shi'a Islam to be incompatible with Wahhabi Islam and impose restrictions on its practice.

Members of the Shi'a community have been arrested, imprisoned and harassed for holding collective prayer meetings, celebrating Shi'a religious festivals and for breaching restrictions on building Shi'a mosques and religious schools.

Demonstrations have been taking place in Saudi Arabia's predominantly Shi'a Eastern Province since February 2011.

The Saudi Arabian authorities have responded with repressive measures against those suspected of taking part in or supporting the protests, and for expressing views critical of the authorities.

Protesters have been held without charge and incommunicado for days or weeks at a time, and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in detention.

Reporting on the arrests of several Shi'a Muslims on 14 March 2009, the former Minister of the Interior stated: "Citizens have both rights and duties; their activities should not contradict the doctrine followed by the Ummah [the Muslim community]. It is the doctrine of Sunnis and our righteous forefathers.

"There are citizens who follow other schools of thought, and the intelligent among them must respect this doctrine."