

AI Index: PRE 01/489/2012
12 October 2012

Jordan: Arrest of 20 pro-reform activists heralds crackdown on freedom of expression

The Jordanian authorities must end their crackdown against pro-reform activists and allow them freely to express their views, Amnesty International said.

Twenty detainees – all members of pro-reform groups - were arrested across the country between 15 July and 4 October 2012 either during or following peaceful protests throughout the country, calling for legal and economic reforms, greater political freedoms, and an end to corruption.

“Amnesty International calls on the Jordanian authorities to release all those held solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression, association and assembly immediately and unconditionally,” said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International’s Deputy Programme Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“King Abdallah’s open letter this week to the incoming Prime Minister, emphasizing the ‘government’s responsibility to respect freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest’, is at odds with the punitive measures we are seeing imposed on peaceful protestors.”

One of the activists, Sa’oud al-‘Ajarmeh, appeared before the State Security Court (SSC) yesterday on charges which can carry a maximum sentence of life imprisonment in an apparent attempt to penalize him for peacefully criticizing the government.

Sa’oud al-‘Ajarmeh of the Tayyar al-Orduni 36 (Jordan 36 Movement), was arrested in July in Amman reportedly for publicly criticizing the King and other officials during a protest against a new elections law, which opponents of it say serves to favour candidates loyal to the government.

He is being tried on charges of “carrying out acts that undermine the political system in the Kingdom” and “inciting others to carry out illegitimate acts”.

“We are also extremely concerned at reports that one of the men - Hesham al-Sarahin,, was beaten during arrest on 7 September in Sports City, Amman, and that Sa’oud al-‘Ajarmeh was beaten in Um al-Loulou prison on 10 October by fellow-prisoners held on non-political charges,” said Harrison.

“It is the authorities’ responsibility to ensure that these men are protected against torture and other ill-treatment and therefore we call on them to open independent, impartial, thorough and comprehensive investigations into these allegations and to bring anyone found to be responsible for abuses to justice.”

The 20 men await trial before the SSC, a special court whose procedures fail to meet international fair trial standards, for their activities in a number of pro-reform groups.

Charges against them include “carrying out acts that undermine the political system in the Kingdom”;

participating in an “illegitimate gathering”; “insulting the King”; spreading news that aims at “weakening national sentiment or inciting sectarian and racial strife”; and “attempting to change the state’s constitution” - a charge which is punishable by death.

Those arrested include activists from the southern town of Tafileh, the western town of Karak and the capital Amman. Most of them are held in Jweideh prison, though some are in al-Hashemy, Balqaa’ and Um al-Loulou prisons.

The detained men’s lawyers have complained they are being denied full access to their case files and some of them said they are not allowed adequate time to interview their clients.

Background:

Since regular protests calling for reform in Jordan began in January 2011, the King has promised to implement political, economic and social change, suggesting that there will be a transfer of power from the monarch to parliament and that future governments will be democratically elected and based on representative political parties.

The King has appointed a new prime minister four times since February 2012, tasking them with expediting reforms, but protests are continuing at the lack of any actual reforms.

These latest arrests are part of a persistent pattern whereby the authorities repress legitimate criticism by pro-reform activists by charging them under Jordanian laws such as “insulting the King” which are used to criminalize peaceful expression, including political dissent.

In March, six men from the Free Tafileh Movement were detained as prisoners of conscience for several weeks, following an earlier protest by Tafileh residents which ended in violence; none of the men had any apparent involvement in the violence or even in the organization of the protest. Accusations against them included “insulting” the King.

Amnesty International called for the release of the men, who faced charges including “insulting” the King, and were prisoners of conscience held solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and who were being punished for their pro-reform views and peaceful activities.

At the end of March, dozens of apparently peaceful protestors, who were allegedly beaten and kicked by members of the Gendarmerie, were arrested in Amman after they called for the overthrow of the government.

Read more at:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/jordan-pro-reformists-detained-insulting-king-must-be-released-2012-04-03>

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE16/002/2012/en>