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Qatar: Detained ‘Jasmine uprising’ poet being tried in secret

A poet facing a secret trial in Qatar after being detained since last year is a possible prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally if he has been detained solely for his peaceful criticism, Amnesty International has urged as the one-year anniversary of his arrest approaches.

Mohammed al-Ajami – also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb – was arrested on 16 November 2011 in the capital Doha, and later reportedly charged with “inciting to overthrow the ruling system” and “insulting the Amir”.

The prosecution’s case against him is reportedly based on a poem he wrote in 2010 criticizing Qatar’s Amir, but Gulf activists have alleged the real reason for his arrest was his “Jasmine Poem”, written in 2011 in the context of unrest across the Middle East and North Africa.

“Mohammed al-Ajami has now spent almost a year behind bars in solitary confinement apparently solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. If that is the case, he would be considered a prisoner of conscience and should be released immediately and conditionally,” said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

Al-Ajami’s “Jasmine Poem” broadly criticizes governments across the Gulf, stating that “we are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite”.

Qatari state security reportedly summoned and arrested the poet in Doha last November, and he was then allegedly held incommunicado for months before being allowed family visits. It is believed he is currently being detained in the capital’s Central Prison. He has been held in solitary confinement since his arrest.

His trial in Doha’s Criminal Court has been marred by irregularities, with court sessions held in secret. His lawyer reportedly had to provide a written defence of his client after being barred from attending one of the court sessions.

“Inciting to overthrow the regime” is a charge punishable by death in Qatar, while “insulting the Amir” carries a five-year prison sentence.

“Qatari authorities must ensure that legal proceedings against al-Ajami are carried out in accordance with international fair trial standards and that any charges which relate solely to peaceful criticism, even if it is of the highest authority in the country, are dropped,” said Luther.

“Qatar must relax restrictions on freedom of expression and ensure poets, bloggers, journalists and everyone else are allowed to speak their minds without fear of facing incommunicado detention, secret trials and other harsh repercussions.”

Freedom of expression is strictly controlled in Qatar, hampering freedom of the press and contributing to self-censorship among the media.

Qatar's accession to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in May 2008 further threatened free speech – provisions of the GCC's Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism risk criminalizing legitimate activities.