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Qatar: Release poet sentenced to 15 years in prison

A 15-year prison sentence upheld today by Qatar's highest court against a man who wrote a poem considered critical of the ruling family must be overturned immediately, said Amnesty International.

Mohammed Rashid al-Ajami, who is also known as Mohamed Ibn Al-Dheeb, was first arrested in November 2011 and charged with incitement to overthrow the ruling system and insulting the Amir of Qatar.

"Sentencing someone to a lengthy prison term because of the content of poetry that the authorities see as critical of them but does not advocate violence is a blatant violation of the right to freedom of expression," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Amnesty International considers Mohammed al-Ajami a prisoner of conscience held solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. He should be released immediately and unconditionally and his verdict quashed.

"It is particularly alarming to see a sentence like this from Qatar - which is branding itself as a country that embraces the arts and purports to respect international human rights standards."

This month a controversial exhibition featuring the work of the British artist Damien Hirst opened in the country.

The charges brought against Mohammed al-Ajami were in relation to a poem he composed in August 2010 while studying Arabic literature in Cairo.

However, activists in the Gulf region believe that the real reason for his detention was a work known as "the Jasmine Poem", which he wrote in 2011 during the wave of protests that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and swept through the region. The poem criticized Gulf states and read: "we are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite".

Both poems were disseminated widely on the internet. Neither called for violence of any kind.

Mohammed al-Ajami was sentenced to life in prison in November 2012. The sentence was reduced to 15 years in prison by an appeal court in February 2013.