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Saudi Arabian human rights lawyer sentenced to prison for demanding reforms

Today's decision by a Jeddah criminal court to imprison a prominent human rights lawyer for having signed a pro-reform statement two years ago is yet another sign of the arbitrary nature of Saudi Arabia's justice system, Amnesty International said.

Human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair has been sentenced to three months in prison for offending the Saudi Arabian judiciary. The charges stem mainly from his signing a petition in 2011 that criticized the heavy-handedness of the Saudi Arabian authorities in dealing with 16 reformists.

"This trial is a yet another example of how the authorities abuse the justice system to silence peaceful dissent in Saudi Arabia," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Programme Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"This conviction and prison sentence should be quashed. And the pending charges should be dropped. Amnesty International considers anybody put behind bars merely for peacefully exercising the right to freedom of expression to be a prisoner of conscience who must be released immediately and unconditionally."

Waleed Abu al-Khair has been a defence lawyer in prominent human rights cases. Among his clients has been Raif Badawi, a well-known Saudi Arabian blogger who was sentenced in July this year to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for, among other things, insulting religious authorities by creating and managing a website.

Waleed Abu al-Khair was among other activists who first faced trial in late 2011 after signing a statement calling for reforms in Saudi Arabia as massive pro-reform protests were taking place elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the other signatories are currently serving long prison terms for similar charges. Another detained signatory, Fadhel al-Manasif, had his fourth trial session today.

The 2011 statement called for the right to peaceful assembly, criticized prison sentences given to reformists and called for an end to police shootings of Shi'a Muslim protesters in the east of the country.

Waleed Abu al-Khair is expected to appeal the conviction. He was facing trial on a list of charges, but the judge dropped most of these claiming that they did not fall under his court's jurisdiction. He is currently facing trial before a special terrorism court in a case that was brought against him by the general prosecution in September 2013.

"Currently in Saudi Arabia we are going through a critical phase for human rights defenders. Because the calls for reform have increased, an intensive campaign was launched to silence human rights defenders and to control public opinion," Waleed Abu al-Khair told Amnesty International.

"I have no choice but to withstand the force of this storm out of respect for all the activists who preceded me and the principles we believe in. My only choice is to remain steadfast and to endure it."

Waleed Abu al-Khair's sentencing comes a week after a number of countries strongly criticized Saudi Arabia's human rights record at the United Nations. Since then the Saudi Arabian authorities have lashed out at Amnesty International and other international human rights organizations, claiming they are "biased".

Background

Also today, reports emerged that the Saudi Arabian authorities suddenly released Hamza Kashgari who was returned from Malaysia in 2012 and faced charges of apostasy. He had been detained without a trial for over a year.

Since March 2013, at least seven prominent human rights defenders have been sentenced to prison terms ranging anywhere from 10 months to 11 years, followed by travel bans of equal duration.