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Jordan: Freedom of expression at risk

The arrests of a former MP and a journalist after they publicly criticised the Jordanian government sends a worrying signal for freedom of expression in Jordan, Amnesty International said today.

Toujan al-Faisal, former member of the Jordanian Parliament, and Hashem al-Khalidi, editor of the weekly al-Bilad, were arrested on 16 and 17 March respectively, in connection with their public criticism of the government's policies. Both face imprisonment of between three and six months, or a fine of not more than 5,000 Jordanian dinars; or both punishments.

"All Toujan al-Faisal and Hashem al-Khalidi are 'guilty' of is freely expressing their opinions," Amnesty International said, calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Following interrogation, the State Security Court Prosecutor ordered that Toujan al-Faisal be held for 15 days (which is renewable) reportedly on charges of "publishing material deemed harmful to the country's reputation and that of its citizens" as well as "tarnishing the Jordanian state". She is being held in Jweidah prison, Amman. A second application for her bail, made on 17 March, is pending. On Sunday, Toujan al-Faisal began a hunger strike protesting her arrest. Today, her brother was refused access to visit her in prison.

Hashem al-Khalidi was arrested on the order of the State Security Court prosecutor following publication of an article in his newspaper column of 11 March. He is to be held for 15 days pending

trial apparently on charges of "publishing false material deemed harmful to the country's reputation and that of its citizens".

The arrests followed hastily promulgated new laws placing limitations on the freedom of expression by making illegal a number of new vaguely defined offences in relation to harming national unity; harming the prestige, integrity and reputation of the state; inciting disturbances, sit-downs and unauthorized public meetings; causing harm to the dignity, reputation or personal freedom of individuals; destabilizing society through the promotion of deviance and immorality; and dissemination of false information and rumours.

These laws were passed through a provisional order in the absence of Parliament, in the wake of the 11 September events, and came into effect on 2 October 2001, immediately after approval by King 'Abdallah bin Hussein.

"All laws allowing for the detention of those exercising their right to the freedom of expression should be immediately repealed," Amnesty International said, urging the Jordanian government to bring the country's legislation into line with international human rights law.

Background

Prior to these arrests, and since the introduction of the amended penal laws of October which include "anti-terrorist" legislation, two other journalists were arrested. Fahd al-Rimawi, the editor-in-chief of the weekly political newspaper *al-Majd*, was arrested on 13 January 2002 and held until 16 January. He was charged with "writing and publishing false information and rumours that may harm the prestige and reputation of the state and slander the integrity and reputation of its members" following the publication on 7 January of an opinion piece

critical of the Jordanian government. Fahd al-Rimawi was released on bail of 5,000 Jordanian dinars (\$7,100) pending his referral to the State Security Court (see: *Jordan: Security measures violate human rights*, February 2002, MDE 16/001/2002).

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Jordan has ratified, establishes the right to freedom of expression which includes the "... freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of [one's] choice."

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