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Jordan: Right to freedom of expression and association denied

Amnesty International strongly condemned today the arbitrary closure of a human rights group, the Jordanian Society for Citizens' Rights (JSCR), and the continued detention of three trade unionists and members of the Anti-Normalisation Committee of the Jordanian Professional Associations (JPA).

"The trend to silence peaceful critics and deny them their rights to freedom of expression and association continues," Amnesty International said. "These repressive measures constitute yet another attempt by the Jordanian government to gag civil society."

The Jordanian Society for Citizens' Rights (JSCR) had to end its activities on 29 October after the Minister of Interior ordered its closure and the cancellation of its registration for alleged violation of the Societies and Social Institutions Act. Amnesty International fears that the decision by the Ministry of Interior to close the JSCR may be politically motivated and is apparently related to public statements of the JSCR including those which criticized official policies on citizenship and numerous temporary laws such as the elections law and the assemblies law adopted by the government since parliament was dissolved in June 2001.

The Anti-Normalisation Committee, whose supporters are highly critical of the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, is at risk of being outlawed by the Jordanian government. On 7 October three members of the Anti-Normalisation Committee, 'Ali Abu-Sukkar, Badi' Rafay'ah and Maysarah Malas, were arrested on charges of membership of an illegal organization after they reportedly distributed leaflets critical of Jordans' official stance towards Israel. Amnesty International considers 'Ali Abu-Sukkar, Badi' Rafay'ah and Maysarah Malas to be possible prisoners of conscience detained solely for the peaceful expression of their opinions, and calls for their immediate release.

Amnesty International is concerned that the temporary laws, passed through a provisional order in the wake of the 11 September events, place limitations on freedom of expression by making illegal a number of vaguely defined acts such as calling for unauthorized public meetings, causing harm to the reputation of individuals, harming national unity, and disseminating false information.

Amnesty International has called for these new laws threatening the right to freedom of expression to be immediately and unconditionally repealed, as a number of journalists, human

rights activists and peaceful demonstrators have been unfairly detained under their provisions.

Background

On 28 October the Minister of Interior ordered the closure of the JSCR and the cancellation of its registration for its alleged violation of the Societies and Social Institutions Act including its failure to submit yearly reports on JSCR's activities and finances for the years 1999,2000 and 2001 and its alleged refusal to allow the Ministry of Interior to search the documents and premises of the JSCR. The closure of the JSCR came about six weeks after the JSCR had received a letter from the Minister of Interior informing them about the planned closure. The JSCR had to end its activities despite a reply sent by the Director of JSCR, Fawzi Samhuri, to the Minister of the Interior in which he addressed the allegations confirming that the JSCR had submitted its 1999 activities report and sending copies of its 2000 and 2001 reports which had been approved by JSCR members in an ordinary meeting on 18 October 2002. A copy of the JSCR report which had been sent to the Ministry of Interior on 27 November 1999 was resubmitted. The JSCR also denied receiving any request from the Ministry of Interior to search the premises and documents of JSCR. JSCR is the first civil society institution in Jordan to be closed since 1989.

The Anti-Normalisation Committee, was established by representatives of different trade unions within the framework of the Jordanian Professional Association. 'Ali Abu- Sukkar is the Secretary General of the Jordanian Engineers Association. Following the arrests of the three trade unionists the Jordanian government reportedly demanded that the Anti-Normalisation Committee be dissolved by the Council of the Jordanian Professional Association. At the same time the government threatened to dissolve the Council of the Jordanian Professional Association itself if it failed to ensure that the Anti-Normalisation Committee ceased its activities.

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