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Jordan: Amnesty International calls on the government to end continuing human rights violations

Human rights violations have continued in Jordan despite a series of reforms undertaken by the government since 1989, Amnesty International says in a report launched today which also underlines "a lack of legal safeguards to prevent such violations".

The report, based on a memorandum sent to the Jordanian government in June 1998, focuses on three main areas: the use of prolonged incommunicado detention against political suspects; restrictions on freedom of expression sometimes leading to the detention of suspected political opponents for non-violent activities; and reports of torture and ill-treatment of political and common law suspects.

The report details cases of people apparently arbitrarily detained for political reasons by the General Intelligence Department (GID) before being released without charge. For instance, in the month of May 1997, those arrested included students who took down a portrait of the King; fans of heavy metal music, accused of being "satanists"; and an Islamist preacher. Though they are normally well-treated, they are often held in incommunicado detention - contrary to international standards ratified by Jordan which insist that detainees have prompt access to lawyers and family.

Non-violent political opponents, such as Layth Shubeilat, a well-known opposition leader, and 'Ata' Abu 'l-Rushta, spokesperson of *Hizb al-Tahrir* (Liberation Party), a small Islamist party which refuses registration and declares itself to be non-violent, have been detained more than once under vaguely-worded laws which allow the detention of opponents of the government who have not advocated or used violence. One such article of the penal code prescribes a sentence of up to three years on charges of *italat al-lisan* (*lèse majesté*, insulting the dignity of the sovereign); After violent bread riots in August 1996, hundreds of people were arrested and charged with *italat al-lisan*. "The charge sheet almost invariably failed to detail the time and place of the offence committed or the words used", the report says. After up to three months in detention, all those involved in the riots were freed by royal amnesty.

Newspapers have long been restricted in their freedom of expression by press and publications laws which have an obscure list of large areas off bounds to journalists - they include "articles which insult heads of friendly states" and "articles offending the dignity of officials". Until August 1998 journalists and editors were frequently arrested or harassed by endless court appearances.

In January 1998 the Jordanian High Court of Justice declared the restrictive 1997 Press and Publications Law unconstitutional, but the 1998 Press Law also imposes heavy charges on newspapers and threats of crippling fines which seem equally designed to create an atmosphere of self-censorship. Amnesty International's report welcomes the government's commitment, in October 1998, not to enforce punitive articles of the law and "to turn a page in relations between the press and the government". However, the report points out that "as long as vaguely worded prohibitions and punitive articles continue on the statute book, press freedom remains endangered".

Among the factors which lead to continuing reports of torture and ill-treatment are incommunicado detention without access to family or lawyers. Although most political detainees are well-treated there have been some well-substantiated allegations of torture or ill-treatment, over the past years. For instance, most of the 10 detainees now standing trial in connection with several explosions in Amman in early 1998 were held incommunicado for more than two months after their arrest in May. They allege that they were subjected to beatings, *shabeh* (prolonged sleep-deprivation in painful positions), *falaqa* (beating on the soles of the feet), and prolonged suspension in contorted positions.

In at least three cases over the past two years detainees appear to have died following beating by different security services. Sometimes there has been no proper investigation; other prosecutions appear to have foundered on being passed to the police prosecution department. "There seems to be almost total impunity for members of the security services involved in torturing or ill-treating detainees", the report adds.

The report praises many court decisions, including a number of decisions of the Court of Cassation, to retry or release detainees whose confessions appeared to have been extracted by torture.

Amnesty International's report calls on the new Jordanian government to reaffirm the country's commitment to the values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by bringing Jordanian law and practice closer to the letter and spirit of international human rights treaties to which it is a state party. Its recommendations include an end to incommunicado detention, amending the Press Law to guarantee the right to freedom of expression and the inspection of detention centres by an independent body.

Background

After 1989 the Jordanian Government dismantled a system which had allowed large-scale arrest and detention of prisoners of conscience, widespread torture, and unfair trials of political detainees.

Reforms included the lifting of the state of emergency in force since 1939 and the abolition of martial law courts. In 1992 the Law on Resistance to Communism which had allowed the imprisonment of suspected communists for up to 15 years, was abolished. A new law was adopted which eventually led to the legalization of most political parties.

Hundreds of political prisoners were released and measures which might prevent torture or ill-treatment of political prisoners began to be put in place.

. Since 1976 Jordan has been a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

. In November 1991, Jordan acceded to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention against Torture).

. Jordan is also a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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