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Saudi Arabia: Seven years in prison and 600 lashes for online forum founder

The sentencing on Monday of writer and activist Raif Badawi to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for peacefully expressing his ideas is an affront to justice and an egregious violation of Saudi Arabia's human rights obligations, Amnesty International said today. Flogging is corporal punishment that violates international law, which prohibits torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Amnesty International strongly condemns the pervasive drive by the Saudi Arabian authorities to repress free expression and the numerous convictions of human rights activists in the country so far in 2013. It considers Raif Badawi and all those detained solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression as prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

On 29 July, a Criminal Court in Jeddah, western Saudi Arabia, convicted Raif Badawi for, amongst other things, creating and managing an online forum, Saudi Arabian Liberals, where anonymous posts appeared and were considered offensive to Islam by religious authorities. Raif Badawi was also convicted for insulting religious symbols in his tweets and Facebook posts and for criticizing the "Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" (also known as the religious police) and officials who argued against including women in the Shura Council. The judge also ordered that the online forum be shut down.

The prosecution and sentencing of Raif Badawi for expressing his opinions, including his questioning of the official interpretation of religion and religious practices, is the latest episode in a mounting attempt by the Saudi authorities to prevent any form of free expression.

During 2013, the Saudi Arabian authorities have harassed, intimidated, detained or sentenced over a dozen prominent human rights activists for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. On the day Raif Badawi was sentenced, his lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, who is a prominent human rights defender, appeared in court for the 13th session of his 20-month-old trial for ridiculing the Saudi Arabian judicial system.

In June alone the authorities sentenced at least 11 individuals to prison terms for expressing themselves online. On 24 June, the Specialized Criminal Court in Dammam sentenced seven men to between five and 10 years in prison for Facebook posts in support of a detained Saudi Arabian Shi'a Muslim cleric in the country's Eastern Province where ongoing demonstrations have been repressed with excessive force.

On the same day, the authorities sentenced and imprisoned Dr Abdulkareem Yousef al-Khoder, a professor of Islamic Jurisprudence and co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) to eight years in prison and a 10-year travel ban for vague charges such as disobeying the ruler, inciting disorder by calling for demonstrations, harming the image of the state by disseminating false information to foreign groups, and taking part in founding an unlicensed organization. Earlier in March the authorities sentenced two other ACPRA co-founders and human rights defenders, Dr

Abdullah bin Hamid bin Ali al-Hamid and Dr Mohammad bin Fahad bin Muflih al-Qahtani, to 10 and 11 years' imprisonment and travel bans of equal duration for similarly vague charges.

A week earlier, on 17 June, the Specialized Criminal Court in Jeddah sentenced a prominent human rights activist, Mikhlif bin Daham al-Shammari, to five years in prison followed by a 10-year travel ban for his peaceful human rights activism. Also in June, the authorities sentenced two outspoken women's rights activists, Wajeha al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-Oyouni, to 10 months in prison for attempting to help a woman whom the authorities considered to be defying her husband.

In addition to repressive measures against activists and organizations, the Saudi Arabian authorities have also attempted to wipe out the online presence and social media accounts of activists and organizations, as they have done with Raif Badawi's website, Saudi Arabian Liberals. The social media accounts of ACPRA were ordered to be closed on the same day the organization was disbanded. Dozens of men and women demonstrators arrested over the past months have also been ordered to cancel their online social media accounts and threatened with long prison sentences if they publicly discuss their cases or use the internet to engage in public activism.

The fact that activists are arrested and convicted on the basis of the content of their tweets or Facebook messages suggests that the authorities are closely monitoring online public spaces. Some have been charged with such "offences" as contacting foreign groups – in many instances international human rights organizations – and storing and sharing information on the internet.

The authorities have also taken measures to monitor and control encrypted social networking software such as Viber, Skype and Whatsapp. In March a "confidential and urgent" letter from Saudi Arabia's Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) asking internet providers to "take all needed steps to achieve security control over communications" was leaked. In a subsequent "confidential and urgent" letter, the CITC requested that all service providers inform the authorities of the progress they had made in monitoring social media applications and that, in the absence of any progress, they should notify the CITC of their technical capacities to shut them down. Soon afterwards, Viber announced that its services were blocked in Saudi Arabia, although these were restored within a few days.

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