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Russia: Release punk singers held after performance in church

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of three young women arrested by the Russian authorities as members of the punk group 'Pussy Riot' who staged a protest song in Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral on 21 February.

Several members of the punk group 'Pussy Riot', with their faces covered in balaclavas, sang a protest song titled "Virgin Mary, redeem us of Putin" in the cathedral. The Russian authorities subsequently arrested Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova on 4 March and Ekaterina Samusevich on 15 March claiming they were the masked singers. Although the three women admit to being members of the larger 'Pussy Riot' group, they deny any involvement in the particular protest in the cathedral.

The three women are currently in pre-trial detention until 25 April. They have been charged with hooliganism under the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (Article 213), which carries a maximum sentence of seven years' imprisonment.

In the song, the 'Pussy Riot' group criticizes the dedication and support shown by some representatives of the Orthodox Church to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The song also calls on the Virgin Mary to become a feminist and banish Putin.

Even if the three arrested women did take part in the protest, the severity of the response of the Russian authorities – the detention on the serious criminal charge of hooliganism – would not be a justifiable response to the peaceful – if, to many, offensive - expression of their political beliefs. They would therefore be prisoners of conscience.

The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly held that freedom of expression applies not only to inoffensive ideas, "but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population".

Even if the action was calculated to shock and was known to be likely to cause offence, the activists left the Cathedral when requested to do so and caused no damage. The entire action lasted only a few minutes and caused only minimal disruption to those using the Cathedral for other, notably religious, purposes.

The broader political context surrounding the anti-Putin protests at the time – and the anti-clerical, anti-Putin content of the activists' message (themselves unpunishable) – have clearly and unlawfully been taken into account in the charges that have been brought against them.

A video montage of the song available on the internet has led to a wide debate about the protest. The press secretary of President-elect Vladimir Putin called the protest despicable and said it would be followed up "with all the necessary consequences".

Although a representative of the Orthodox Church initially called for mercy for the protestors, subsequent statements by representatives of the Church have called for harsh punishment and for the women to be prosecuted for inciting hatred on grounds of religion. The women's relatives have reportedly also received anonymous death threats.

Amnesty International is concerned that such statements are heightening the public and political pressures around this case. Instead of prosecuting members of 'Pussy Riot' for their political opinions criticizing the Russian government and some Church officials, the Russian authorities must recognize that their protest is protected by the right to freedom of expression, guaranteed in international human rights law, drop the charges of hooliganism against Maria Alekhina, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Ekaterina Samusevich, and release them immediately and unconditionally.

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