

URGENT ACTION

LIFE IN PRISON FOR WRITING POETRY

Qatari poet Mohammed al-Ajami, detained since November 2011, was sentenced to life imprisonment on 29 November for offences that relate to his poems. He appears to be a prisoner of conscience, convicted solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

Poet **Mohammed al-Ajami** (also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb) had been arrested by state security on 16 November 2011 in the capital, Doha, and charged with "inciting to overthrow the ruling system" and "insulting the Amir". He had presented himself to state security when summoned, and been immediately arrested. He was detained incommunicado for months before he was allowed family visits and has been held in solitary confinement during his entire detention. He is detained in Doha's Central Prison.

The prosecution is reported to have brought the charges over a 2010 poem in which Mohammed al-Ajami criticized the Amir. However, activists in the Gulf region believe that the real reason for his arrest was his 2011 work "the Jasmine Poem", which he wrote during the wave of protests throughout the Arab world that began in December 2010. The poem criticized Gulf states and read: "we are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite".

His trial, which began in November 2011 at the Criminal Court in Doha, is said to have been marred by irregularities, with the court sessions held in secret. His lawyer was not allowed to attend one of the court sessions and had to provide his defence in writing only.

He was sentenced to life in prison on 29 November by the same court. Observers were not allowed to enter the court, and Mohammed al-Ajami himself was not present at the sentencing. He is expected to appeal. A copy of the verdict obtained by Amnesty International gives no reason for the harsh sentence, but the organization understands that the charges on which he was convicted were based on the content of his poetry.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Expressing concern that Mohammed al-Ajami has been imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and that, accordingly, he appears to be a prisoner of conscience;
- Calling on the authorities, if this is indeed the case, to release Mohammed al-Ajami immediately and unconditionally and overturn his conviction.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 11 JANUARY 2013 TO:

Minister of the Interior

Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalid Al Thani
Ministry of the Interior
PO Box 920
Doha, State of Qatar
Fax: +974 4444 4945 (keep trying)
Email: info@moi.gov.qa
Salutation: His Excellency

Amir of the State of Qatar

Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani
PO Box 923
Doha, State of Qatar
Fax: +974 4436 1212
Salutation: Your Highness

And copies to:

Attorney General

Dr Ali bin Fetais Al Marri
PO Box 705
Doha, State of Qatar
Fax: +974 4484 3211
Salutation: Dr Ali bin Fetais Al Marri

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA 319/12. Further information:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/mde22/002/2012>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Freedom of expression is strictly controlled in Qatar, and the press often exercises self-censorship. The right to freedom of expression is further threatened by the 2004 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism, whose provisions risk criminalizing legitimate activities. The Qatari government acceded to this convention in May 2008.

The rights to freedom of expression and assembly are guaranteed under international human rights law and standards. Where restrictions are imposed they must be for certain specific purposes, which include the protection of the rights and reputation of others; they must be demonstrably necessary and proportionate and must not put in jeopardy the right itself. Public figures of authority should tolerate a greater degree of criticism, not less, than people generally; any laws that provide special protection against criticism for public officials are not consistent with respect for freedom of expression.

Name: Mohammed al-Ajami

Gender m/f: M

Further information on UA: 319/12 Index: MDE 22/004/2012 Issue Date: 30 November 2012