

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL/HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: MDE 25/004/2012  
30 April 2012

## **United Arab Emirates: End Arrests; Free Political Activists**

### **Stop Crackdown on Freedom of Expression, Association**

(London, 30 April, 2012) --The United Arab Emirates (UAE) authorities should immediately and unconditionally release nine political activists held in the context of a widening attack on dissent, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said today. The government should stop threatening to revoke the citizenship of seven of them because of their political activity.

The authorities are holding the men solely on account of their affiliation with a non-violent political group and their peaceful criticism of the government, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said. The nine men belong to the Reform and Social Guidance Association (al-Islah), a non-profit organization that advocates greater adherence to Islamic precepts, which has been engaged in peaceful political debate and discussion in the UAE for many years.

"The UAE authorities need to end this wave of arbitrary arrests," said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International's deputy Middle East and North Africa programme director. "These men, who have not used or advocated violence, are held solely for exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression. They are prisoners of conscience and should be released immediately and unconditionally."

The most recent arrest was on 20 April, 2012, when plain-clothes officials from the UAE Amn al-Dawla (State Security) agency detained the chairman of al-Islah, Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Kayed al-Qasimi. His son, Abdullah Sultan, told Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch that his 54-year-old father is being held, apparently without a detention order or charge, in the palace of the ruler of the Ras al-Khaimah emirate, who is his father's cousin. The ruler has told family members that the basis of the detention relates to a "family matter."

The government claimed through its official news agency in December 2011 that it had stripped six al-Islah members of their UAE citizenship. On 9 April, the authorities detained the men -- Dr. Ali Hussain al-Hammadi, Dr. Shahin Abdullah al-Hosni, Hussein Munif al-Jabri and his brother Hassan Munif al-Jabri; Ibrahim Hassan al-Marzouqi, and Sheikh Mohammad Abdul Razak al-Seddiq -- when they responded to a summons to appear at an Abu Dhabi office of the Interior Ministry. One of the lawyers for the detained men told Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch that the authorities said they arrested the six for refusing to sign a pledge to seek another nationality.

All six are now held in the al-Shihama deportation centre in Abu Dhabi along with the seventh man, Ahmed Ghaith al-Suwaidi, detained since 26 March.

The whereabouts of the ninth man, Dr. Ahmed al-Zaabi, a former judge who was also detained on 26 March, is not clear. He was initially held at al-Rahba Police Station in Abu Dhabi, and was granted bail on 15 April but has not been released.

None of the men are known to have been charged with any criminal offence.

Some of the men were among 130 people who signed a petition in March 2011 seeking political reforms in the UAE.

“This wave of detentions against peaceful dissent is a telling indicator of UAE’s deepening abuses of human rights,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “Their latest action, against these nine men, has once again shown the UAE government’s intentions to silence anyone who peacefully expresses political opinions.”

The December announcement via the government-owned news agency WAM said that a presidential order had stripped six of the men currently detained of their citizenship for “acts posing a threat to the state’s security and safety.”

The UAE authorities have also confiscated the six men’s UAE identity papers, including their national identity and health insurance cards, which enable them to work and enjoy rights as UAE nationals. Earlier in 2011 the authorities had also confiscated the identity papers of the seventh man, al-Suwaidi, who is currently in detention. Lawyers for the seven men have submitted a legal challenge in the country’s federal court system contesting the confiscation of their clients’ documents.

At a hearing before a Federal Court of First Instance in Abu Dhabi on 18 April, the government submitted a memorandum asserting the right of the interior minister to strip UAE citizens of their citizenship in accordance with the law.

The seven men acquired UAE citizenship as children and have never had any other. The UAE authorities’ threat to strip them of their UAE nationality would leave them stateless, and mean they could no longer work or reside legally in the country.

Under UAE law, to strip a person’s citizenship, the Interior Ministry is first required to set out the intention and reasoning in a letter to the Council of Ministers. If the Council of Ministers approves the reasoning, the letter is passed to the UAE president. If he approves, he issues a decree setting out the measures taken, which are then formalized with publication in the official gazette. Although the law does not provide for an automatic right to appeal, the decisions may be challenged in court.

The government has not provided any evidence that it has taken any of the legally required steps to revoke the seven men’s citizenship, however. The men’s lawyers told Amnesty and Human Rights Watch that the seven men received no formal notification that their citizenship had been revoked. No notice has appeared in the official gazette. The next court session is expected on or around 9 May.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are concerned that the UAE authorities are threatening to strip these men of their UAE nationality as a way of punishing them simply for peacefully expressing dissent and to intimidate others from exercising their right to freedom of expression.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of [their] nationality.” Depriving someone of nationality for having exercised the right of peaceful expression would be a disproportionately punitive measure, as leaving them stateless would amount to arbitrary deprivation of nationality.

## **Background**

Independent political activity in the UAE is severely restricted. In the wake of the popular protests since 2011 across the Middle East and North Africa region, a small number of people in the UAE have called openly for greater accountability, transparency and democratization, but have faced repression in a widening crackdown on freedom of expression and association.

In April 2011, the Ministry of Social Affairs took action against two nongovernmental organizations that had signed a joint letter earlier that month calling for reforms. It replaced the executive board members of the Jurists' Association and the Teachers' Association with government appointees.

In early April 2011, the authorities arrested five activists who came to be known as the "UAE 5," after they allegedly posted statements on *UAE Hewan*, an internet forum that the authorities blocked. The messages on *UAE Hewan* that have been attributed to the UAE 5 contained peaceful criticism of government policy or political leaders.

The state charged the five men in early June 2011 under articles 176 and 8 of the UAE Penal Code, which punish public "insults" of the country's top officials. Held throughout the pre-trial and trial process, they were convicted on 27 November, and sentenced to between two and three years in prison. Shortly afterward the UAE's president commuted their sentences and they were released. Their passports, which had been confiscated, have not been returned to them.

On 22 November, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which had looked into the case of Ahmed Mansoor, one of the five, found that he had been arbitrarily detained as a result of his "peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression" and that the trial proceedings, which had, at the time, just concluded, did not comply with international fair trial standards. It called on the government to release him and provide him with adequate compensation.

In late March the UAE authorities closed the local offices of two international organizations, the National Democratic Institute, a body linked to the Democratic Party in the United States, and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, linked to Germany's Christian Democratic Union. Both bodies promote the exchange of ideas and political debate as the foundation of democracy.

Following a review of the human rights situation in the UAE by the UN Human Rights Council under the UN's Universal Periodic Review in December 2008, the government pledged in January 2009, among other things, to "take concrete measures to limit the number and extent of restrictions on the right to freedom of expression."

For more information, please contact:

In London, for Amnesty International, James Lynch (English, Arabic): on +44-20-7413-5566; or [press@amnesty.org](mailto:press@amnesty.org)

In London, for Amnesty International, Drewery Dyke (English): +44-7535-587297; or [ध्ये@amnesty.org](mailto:dध्ये@amnesty.org)

In New York, for Human Rights Watch, Sarah Leah Whitson (English): +1-212-216-1230; or +1-718-362-0172 (mobile); or [whitsos@hrw.org](mailto:whitsos@hrw.org)

In Toronto, for Human Rights Watch, Samer Muscati (English): +1-416-322-8448; or [muscats@hrw.org](mailto:muscats@hrw.org)

In Beirut, for Human Rights Watch, Nadim Houry (English, Arabic, French): +961-1-217-670; or +961-3-639-244 (mobile); or [houryn@hrw.org](mailto:houryn@hrw.org)