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Moroccan journalist set to face trial over security forces criticism

A Moroccan journalist set to go on trial tomorrow, apparently for criticizing Morocco's counter-terrorism law, must be released immediately and unconditionally if he is being held solely for his writing, Amnesty International said today.

Rachid Nini, editor of the el-Massa daily newspaper, was detained on 28 April 2011 following the publication of several articles criticizing the counter-terrorism practices of the Moroccan security services, including prison sentences handed down after unfair trials against Islamists.

He has also repeatedly called for increased political freedom and has written about corruption among government officials.

"The detention of Rachid Nini runs completely counter to reform promises King Mohammed VI made earlier this year, where he promised to strengthen human rights. This is a severe attack on freedom of expression," Amnesty International said.

Rachid Nini has been charged with "undermining of a judicial decision, attempt to influence the judiciary, and reporting on untrue criminal offences". He is currently being held in Okasha prison in Casablanca and his trial is set to begin on 17 May.

"Using criminal charges against someone who is merely exercising his right to peaceful expression is preposterous", Amnesty International said.

"It is wrong to detain a journalist simply for doing his work and questioning the counter-terrorism policies of Morocco and their efficiency and exposing abuses by the security forces."

Rachid Nini's articles have called for investigations into allegations of torture of terrorism-related suspects, as well as condemning abuses at the detention centre in Temara, south of the capital Rabat.

"If Rachid Nini is being held solely for criticizing the counter-terrorism law and corruption, we would consider him to be a prisoner of conscience," Amnesty International said.

The Moroccan authorities have been under pressure to respond to demands for political and human rights reform, following continuing demonstrations since 20 February inspired by the events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

In March a number of reforms were announced, among them a new National Human Rights Council. King Mohammed VI also promised a plan of constitutional reform, as well as giving up some of some his political power.

The Moroccan authorities continue to curb freedom of expression on sensitive issues that touch upon national security, territorial integrity and the monarchy. Human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and

others still face intimidation and even prosecution when they transcend certain “red lines”. On numerous occasions, Amnesty International has called for the repeal or amendment of provisions in the Penal Code and the Press Code which criminalize the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression.

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