

AI Index: PRE 01/586/2012
29 November 2012

Qatar: Outrageous life sentence for ‘Jasmine poet’

A life sentence handed today to a Qatari poet has all the hallmarks of an outrageous betrayal of free speech, Amnesty International has said.

Mohammed al-Ajami, also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb, was tried on charges of incitement “to overthrow the ruling system”, and “insulting the Amir”.

He was arrested in November 2011 following the publication of his “Jasmine Poem”, which broadly criticized governments across the Gulf region, saying “we are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite”.

“It is deplorable that Qatar, which likes to paint itself internationally as a country that promotes freedom of expression, is indulging in what appears to be such a flagrant abuse of that right,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Director.

A copy of the verdict obtained by Amnesty International makes no reference to the reasons for such a harsh sentence, but the organization understands that the charges on which he was convicted were based on the content of his poetry.

“All the information available points to Mohammed al-Ajami being a prisoner of conscience who has been placed behind bars solely for his words. Accordingly, he should be released immediately and his conviction quashed,” said Philip Luther.

The verdict has sent out shock waves among activists in Qatar and the Gulf region, who have told Amnesty International that the sentence feels like a threat to them all.

One activist commented that al-Ajami’s trial was a “trial of the Arab Spring” and a warning against its spread to the Gulf.

“We expected better from Qatar,” said the activist, referring to the country’s talk of parliamentary elections and freedom of expression.

Qatar is the headquarters of media organization Al-Jazeera, which has won plaudits for its reports on uprisings throughout the region in the last two years. However, Qatar has strictly controlled press freedoms and freedom of expression with regard to criticism of its own government.

Observers were not allowed to enter the court, and al-Ajami himself was not present at the sentencing. He is expected to appeal.