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Bahrain starts the new year by tightening the grip on freedom of expression

The Bahraini authorities have tightened its grip on political dissent in Bahrain with new arrests of individuals at the beginning of 2016 for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, including on social media, following the execution of prominent Saudi Arabian Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr on 1 January. The new year also saw the resumption of trials of three leading political opposition figures, all prisoners of conscience. The organization has today urged the authorities to release all prisoners of conscience in Bahrain and to uphold the right to freedom of expression.

Amnesty International has also called on the Bahraini authorities to drop the charges against **Ibrahim Karimi** for comments posted on a twitter account considered "insulting" to the Kings of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, ahead of the opening of his trial on 19 January.

Ibrahim Karimi, who was arbitrarily stripped of his nationality in 2012 and effectively rendered stateless, will be tried for "inciting hatred against the regime", "insulting the king publicly", "misuse of telecommunications systems", "insulting the King of Saudi Arabia publicly", "illegal residency" and possibly other charges.

Amnesty International is concerned that these charges are politically motivated and undermine the right to freedom of expression, which includes expressing views that are critical of the government. In addition, the rights to a fair trial and freedom from torture and other ill-treatment must be protected.

Ibrahim Karimi was arrested on 26 September 2015 and taken to the Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID) where he was interrogated, without a lawyer present, about comments posted on a Twitter account (FreejKarimi) criticizing the Saudi Arabian authorities as "unqualified" over how they dealt with a stampede in September 2015 that caused the death of hundreds of people during Hajj, the Muslims' religious pilgrimage to Mecca. He denied being the owner of that account, which bears his surname. He later told his lawyer that he was kept in solitary confinement, deprived of sleep and forced to stand for a prolonged period. He said that he signed a "confession" after interrogators insulted him and threatened to arrest his son. The authorities should immediately and independently investigate these allegations, which amount to torture and other ill-treatment in custody.

Ibrahim Karimi denied all the charges against him during his interrogation by the Public Prosecution on 29 September, in the presence of his lawyer. The same day, the Public Prosecution Office (PPO) stated on its Instagram account that when searching the home of "the owner of the Twitter account (FreejKarimi)" they found "an electric shock device and mobile phones... which he admitted belonged to him".

Ibrahim Karimi had his nationality arbitrarily revoked by the Ministry of Interior in November 2012, along with 30 others, rendering him stateless. He is currently appealing against a 2014 court order to deport him together with nine others of the group who are still in Bahrain. The deportation was halted until a final verdict is issued.

Ibrahim Karimi's trial comes two weeks after the security forces arrested a number of protesters, some of whom participated in protests which turned violent, and social media users protesting against the execution of the Saudi Arabian Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, and the resumption of trials of several prisoners of conscience. The arrests were made after the Ministry of Interior issued a warning that it will take "legal action against anyone attempting to use the recent verdicts in Saudi Arabia to heighten sectarian tensions or to incite violence".

Dr Sa'eed Muthafer Habib al-Samihiji was arrested on 3 January and interrogated at the CID, without his lawyer present, in relation to disseminating information about the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and insulting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on Twitter. The following day, the PPO stated on its Instagram account that an individual has been detained for "misusing telecommunications systems to insult a brotherly nation and inciting unlicensed demonstrations which had led to demonstrations accompanied by violent acts". His detention was extended a further 15 days on 11 January.

These arrests and trials demonstrate the Bahraini authorities' increasing intolerance of criticism and its determination to continue its repression of the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in 2016.

Three leading political opposition figures, all prisoners of conscience, languish in detention for their peaceful criticism of the authorities' policies and continued to stand trial in January 2016.

The trial of **Ebrahim Sharif**, former Secretary General of the National Democratic Action Society (*Wa'ad*), resumed on 10 January for "incitement to hatred and contempt of the regime" and "incitement to overthrow the regime by force and illegal means", following his speech at a public gathering in July 2015 calling for change in Bahrain and stressing the commitment of the political opposition to non-violence. He has not been able to discuss his case with his lawyer in private, violating his right to confidential communication with a lawyer, which is an important element of the right to a fair trial, and his ability to prepare a defence. He has denied all charges. A verdict is expected on 24 February 2016.

On 11 January, **Fadhel Abbas Mahdi Mohamed**, Secretary General of The Unitary National Democratic Assemblage (*al-Wahdawi* party), continued to appeal a five-year prison sentence handed against him in June 2015 for "spreading false information that could damage military operations of Bahrain and its allies and calling for resistance" and "publicly insulting the allied countries" in relation to a statement issued by his party describing the Saudi Arabia-led airstrikes in Yemen as a violation of international law.

On 14 January, **Sheikh 'Ali Salman**, Secretary General of al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, continued to appeal against a four-year prison sentence, handed down after an unfair trial in June 2015 for "public incitement to loathing and contempt of a sect of people which will result in disrupting public order", "publicly insulting the Interior Ministry" and "publicly inciting others to disobey the law" in connection with statements in his speeches in 2012 and 2014. In September 2015, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that his detention was arbitrary, and called on the Bahraini authorities to release him immediately and grant him adequate compensation.

Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Bahraini authorities to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally and stop targeting political opponents. The organization also calls on the authorities to respect the right to a fair trial, including access to a lawyer and to promptly and independently investigate all allegations of torture and ill treatment in custody.