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UAE: Free Prominent Rights Defender Ahmed Mansoor Held on Speech-Related Charges

(Beirut, 20 April 2017) – Authorities in the [United Arab Emirates](#) should immediately release Ahmed Mansoor, an award-winning human rights defender who is facing charges that violate his right to freedom of expression, a coalition of 18 human rights organizations said today, one month after his arrest.

Ahmed Mansoor, who received the prestigious [Martin Ennals Award](#) for Human Rights Defenders in 2015, has been in [detention](#) since 20 March 2017 facing speech-related charges that include using social media websites to “publish false information that harms national unity.” On 28 March, a group of United Nations (UN) [human rights experts](#) called on the UAE government to release him immediately, describing his arrest as “a direct attack on the legitimate work of human rights defenders in the UAE.”

“Ahmed Mansoor has an unimpeachable record as a defender of rights and freedoms, and every day he remains in prison will constitute a black mark on the UAE’s human rights record,” said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

Informed sources have told rights groups that about a dozen security officers arrested Ahmed Mansoor at his home in Ajman in the pre-dawn hours of 20 March. They conducted an extensive search and took away all of the family’s mobile phones and laptops, including those belonging to his young children. His family had no information on his whereabouts until authorities issued an [official statement](#) on 29 March, saying he was in detention in the Central Prison in Abu Dhabi.

The signatories understand that Ahmed Mansoor’s family have been allowed only one short supervised visit with him which took place two weeks after his arrest on 3 April, when authorities moved him from where he was being held, believed to be a detention facility adjacent to Al-Wathba Prison, to a prosecutor’s office in Abu Dhabi. Informed sources told rights groups that Ahmed Mansoor is being held in solitary confinement and has not spoken to a lawyer.

The UAE’s official news agency, WAM, said on 20 March that Ahmed Mansoor had been arrested on the orders of the Public Prosecution for Cybercrimes and detained pending further investigation. It said that he is accused of using social media websites to: “publish false information and rumours;” “promote [a] sectarian and hate-incited agenda;” and “publish false and misleading information that harm national unity and social harmony and damage the country’s reputation.” The statement classified these as “cybercrimes,” indicating that the charges against him may be based on alleged violations of the UAE’s repressive 2012 cybercrime law, which authorities have used to imprison numerous activists and which provides for long prison sentences and severe financial penalties.

In the weeks leading up to his arrest, Ahmed Mansoor had called for the release of [Osama al-Najjar](#), who remains in prison, despite having completed a three-year prison sentence on charges related to his peaceful activities on Twitter. Ahmed Mansoor had also criticized the prosecution of Dr. Nasser bin-Ghaith, a prominent academic and economist, who was [sentenced to 10 years in prison](#) on 29 March, for charges that included speech-related offenses, including peaceful criticism of the UAE and [Egyptian](#) authorities.

Ahmed Mansoor had also used his Twitter account to draw attention to human rights violations across the region, including in Egypt and those committed by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. He had also

signed a joint letter with other activists in the region calling on leaders at the Arab Summit in Jordan at the end of March to release political prisoners in their countries.

“Ahmed Mansoor has worked tirelessly, at great personal cost to himself, to advocate for human rights in the UAE and the wider region. He should be immediately released and the authorities should end their harassment of him once and for all,” said Lynn Maalouf, Deputy Director for Research at Amnesty International’s Beirut Regional office.

The UN special rapporteurs on human rights defenders, on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression and opinion, and on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, along with the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, said in their 28 March statement that Ahmed Mansoor’s “outstanding work in the protection of human rights and the advancement of democracy, as well as his transparent collaboration with UN mechanisms, is of great value not only for the UAE but for the whole region.”

The UN experts said they feared that his arrest “may constitute an act of reprisal for his engagement with UN human rights mechanisms, for the views he expressed on social media, including Twitter, as well as for being an active member of organizations such as the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, and an active supporter of others, including Human Rights Watch.”

“Ahmed Mansoor’s arrest and detention is extremely alarming because it represents a major assault on human rights defenders in the UAE and signals all-out repression in the country,” said Khalid Ibrahim, Executive Director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR). Ahmed Mansoor is a member of GCHR’s Advisory Board.

On 29 March, the UAE authorities responded directly to the UN experts’ statement, disputing the allegation that Ahmed Mansoor’s detention was arbitrary, and stating that Ahmed Mansoor “has the freedom to hire a lawyer and that his family has full access to the place of confinement and is allowed to visit him.” In 2015, the [UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers](#), who had visited the UAE in 2014, expressed concern that lawyers who take up cases related to state security “have been harassed, threatened and had pressure exerted on them,” and that “impunity surrounding such breaches of the independence of the legal profession has had a chilling effect on lawyers,” making it difficult for defendants in the UAE to secure a lawyer of their choice.

UAE authorities have harassed and persecuted Ahmed Mansoor for more than six years. In November 2011, the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi sentenced Ahmed Mansoor to three years in prison for insulting the country’s top officials in a trial [marred by serious legal and procedural flaws](#). The UAE president, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, pardoned Ahmed Mansoor on 28 November 2011, but authorities never returned his passport, imposing a de facto travel ban. He has also experienced [physical assaults](#), death threats, government surveillance, and a sophisticated spyware attack.

People in the UAE [who speak about human rights abuses](#) are at serious risk of arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and torture, and many are [serving long prison terms](#) or have felt compelled to leave the country. To the knowledge of the signatories, Ahmed Mansoor was the last remaining human rights defender in the UAE who had been able to criticize the authorities publicly.

The authorities should release Ahmed Mansoor immediately, since the charges against him relate to his human rights work and his criticism of the authorities, the signatories said. They should give him immediate and regular access to his family and a lawyer of his choosing, and end the harassment of human rights defenders and critics of the authorities.

SIGNATORIES

ARTICLE 19

Amnesty International

Arabic Network for Human Rights Information

CIVICUS

FIDH, under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Front Line Defenders

Gulf Centre for Human Rights

Human Rights First

Human Rights Watch

Index on Censorship

International Commission of Jurists

International Service for Human Rights

Martin Ennals Foundation

PEN International

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Scholars at Risk

Vigilance for Democracy and the Civic State, Tunisia

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

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