

URGENT ACTION

CONVICTION OF QATARI POET UPHELD

Qatar's highest court has upheld the conviction and 15-year prison sentence of a poet whose poetry was deemed offensive to the state and its ruler. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience and calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

On 20 October Qatar's Court of Cassation upheld an appeal court's sentencing of the poet **Mohammed al-Ajami** to 15 years in prison. He was convicted of inciting to overthrow the ruling system and insulting the Amir.

Mohammed al-Ajami was arrested by Qatar's State Security on 16 November 2011. His trial at the Doha Criminal Court, which began in the same month, was marred by a number of irregularities including court sessions being held in secret, and his lawyer not being allowed to attend one of the court sessions and having to submit his defence in writing. He was held incommunicado for months and is said to have spent most of his detention in solitary confinement. The court convicted him of inciting to overthrow the ruling system and insulting the Amir and sentenced him to life in prison on 29 November 2012. On 25 February 2013, without any explanation, an appeal court reduced his sentence to 15 years.

The prosecution brought the charges over a 2010 poem in which Mohammed al-Ajami criticized the Amir. However, activists in the Gulf region believe that the real reason for his arrest was his 2011 work "The Jasmine Poem", which he wrote during the wave of protests throughout the Arab world that began in Tunisia in December 2010. The poem criticized Gulf states and read: "we are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite". Both poems were disseminated widely on the internet; neither called for violence of any kind.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Calling on the Qatari authorities to release Mohammed al-Ajami immediately and unconditionally and to quash his verdict as he is a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression;
- Urging them to ensure that in the meantime he is protected from ill-treatment and has regular access to his family and lawyers.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 4 DECEMBER 2013 TO:

Prime Minister and Minister of Interior

Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa Al Thani
Ministry of the Interior
PO Box 920
Doha, State of Qatar
Fax: +974 4432 2927
Email: info@moi.gov.qa

Salutation: Your Excellency

Attorney General

Dr Ali bin Fetais Al Marri
PO Box 705
Doha, State of Qatar
Fax: +974 4484 3211
Email: info@pp.gov.qa
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:

Head of state (Amir of Qatar)
Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani
PO Box 923
Doha, State of Qatar
Fax: +974 4436 1212

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the third update of UA 319/12. Further information: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/mde22/004/2013>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Freedom of expression is strictly controlled in Qatar and the press often exercises self-censorship. The right to freedom of expression is further threatened by the 2004 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism, the provisions of which risk criminalizing legitimate activities. The Qatari government acceded to this convention in May 2008.

Since 2011 State Security (which runs its own detention facilities) has detained a number of people, some of them for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Most of those detained by State Security have reported torture and other ill-treatment during periods of detention prior to charge or trial, particularly during periods of incommunicado detention. Activists in Qatar have lately raised concerns that there has been a pattern of State Security personnel, generally operating in plain clothes, not identifying themselves when carrying out arrests and holding detainees in police detention centres and not in facilities run by them. The aim appears to be to deny responsibility for carrying out particular arrests and detentions and thereby to deflect criticism about their working practices.

The rights to freedom of expression and assembly are guaranteed under international human rights law and standards. Where restrictions are imposed they must be for certain specific purposes, which include the protection of the rights and reputation of others; they must be demonstrably necessary and proportionate and must not put in jeopardy the right itself. Public figures of authority should tolerate a greater degree of criticism, not less, than people generally; any laws that provide special protection against criticism for public officials are not consistent with respect for freedom of expression.

See also Amnesty International's press release *Qatar: Release poet sentenced to 15 years in prison*, 21 October 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/qatar-release-poet-sentenced-15-years-prison-2013-10-21>

Name: Mohammed al-Ajami (also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb)

Gender m/f: m

Further information on UA: 319/12 Index: MDE 22/016/2013 Issue Date: 23 October 2013