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Syria must release all prisoners of conscience after human rights lawyer freed

Amnesty International has urged the Syrian authorities to free all prisoners of conscience following the release of a 79-year-old human rights lawyer.

Haytham al-Maleh was freed on Tuesday 8 March 2011, a day after President Bashar al-Assad issued an amnesty for several categories of prisoners, including those aged over 70, those suffering from incurable diseases and others accused of minor offences.

"Haytham al-Maleh's release is a welcome if long overdue step. Like so many others across Syria, he was detained only for exercising his right to freedom of expression," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"It is unacceptable that authorities continue to use the national state of emergency to suppress dissenting voices."

Haytham al-Maleh was serving a three-year sentence after being convicted by a military court in July 2010 of "conveying within Syria false news that could debilitate the morale of the nation" and "weakening national sentiment".

The charges against Haytham al-Maleh were related to a television interview he gave in September 2009 in which he criticized the lack of democracy, excessive powers wielded by security officials and corruption among officials in Syria.

He is also believed to have been targeted for his published articles exposing human rights abuses in the country.

On being released Haytham al-Maleh told Amnesty International: "I hope to keep to my promise I made to those who have supported me, by continuing with my work.

"I call on the government to release all the prisoners of conscience in 'Adra prison and the thousands of others like them detained in security facilities."

Amnesty International campaigned vigorously for Haytham al-Maleh's release following his arrest and, during a rare visit to Syria in June 2010, sent an observer to a session of his trial as a show of solidarity.

The observer told the judge that Amnesty International considered Haytham al-Maleh a prisoner of conscience and said he should be released.

A number of other prisoners of conscience, including human rights activists, are imprisoned in Syria solely for expressing their legitimately held views and peacefully exercising their right to freedom of

association.

Before his release, Haytham al-Maleh and other political prisoners held at Damascus Central Prison started an open-ended hunger strike on 7 March demanding the “closure of the file” on political prisoners, an end to injustices and the restoration of rights to civil and political life in Syria.

Former political prisoners in Syria face a range of restrictions on their activities. For five years after release, they are not able to be employed in the public sector, to teach, to vote or stand for election, nor to own, publish or edit a newspaper or any other publication.

Amnesty International also believes that a travel ban arbitrarily imposed on Haytham al-Maleh six years ago by one of Syria’s security forces is likely to remain in force.