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Saudi Arabia: Protesters and reformists targeted in name of security

The last nine months has seen a new wave of repression in Saudi Arabia as authorities have cracked down on protesters and reformists on security grounds, Amnesty International said today.

In Saudi Arabia: Repression in the Name of Security, the organization says hundreds of people have been arrested for demonstrating, while the government has drafted an anti-terror law that would effectively criminalize dissent as a "terrorist crime" and further strip away rights from those accused of such offences.

"Peaceful protesters and supporters of political reform in the country have been targeted for arrest in an attempt to stamp out the kinds of call for reform that have echoed across the region," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's interim Middle East and North Africa Director.

"While the arguments used to justify this wide-ranging crackdown may be different, the abusive practices being employed by the Saudi Arabian government are worryingly similar to those which they have long used against people accused of terrorist offences."

Amnesty International said that the government continues to detain thousands of people, many of them without charge or trial, on terrorism-related grounds. Torture and other ill-treatment in detention remains rife.

In April 2011, an Interior Ministry spokesperson said that around 5,000 people connected to the "deviant group", meaning al-Qa'ida, had been questioned and referred for trials.

Amnesty International said that since February 2011, when sporadic demonstrations began – in defiance of a permanent national ban on protests – the government had carried out a crackdown that included the arrest of hundreds of mostly Shi'a Muslims in the restive Eastern Province.

Since March 2011 over 300 people who took part in peaceful protests in al-Qatif, al-Ahsa and Awwamiya have been detained, either at demonstrations or shortly afterwards. Most have been released, often after pledging not to protest again. Many face travel bans.

Elsewhere in the country, protests have been stifled by warnings by the Interior Ministry that the authorities would "take all necessary measures" against those who tried to "disrupt order".

Those individuals who did bravely demonstrate were swiftly arrested. Among them was 40-year-old Khaled al-Johani, the only man to demonstrate on the 11 March "Day of Rage" in Riyadh, who told journalists he was frustrated by media censorship in Saudi Arabia and predicted his own arrest.

Charged with supporting a protest and communicating with foreign media, he is believed to have been held in solitary confinement for two months. Nine months on he remains in detention and has not been tried.

A number of people who have spoken up in support of protests or reform have been arrested. Sheikh Tawfiq Jaber Ibrahim al-Amer, a Shi'a cleric, was arrested for the second time this year in August for calling for reform at a mosque. He has been charged with "inciting public opinion".

On 22 November 16 men, including nine prominent reformists, were given sentences by the Specialized Criminal Court ranging from five to 30 years in prison, on charges that included forming a secret organization, attempting to seize power, incitement against the King, financing terrorism, and money laundering.

Amnesty International said that their trial, which began in May 2011, was grossly unfair. The defendants

were reportedly blindfolded and handcuffed during one court session while their lawyer was not allowed to enter the court for the first three sessions.

In July 2011 Amnesty International published a leaked copy of a secret draft anti-terror law, which would allow the Saudi Arabian authorities to prosecute peaceful dissent as a terrorist crime and permit extended detention without charge or trial.

If the law was to be passed without being amended, terrorist crimes would include “endangering... national unity” and “harming the reputation of the state or its position”. Questioning the integrity of the King would carry a minimum prison sentence of 10 years.

After Amnesty International published the draft law, the Saudi Arabian authorities appeared to briefly block access to the organization’s website from within the Kingdom and said that its concerns about the law were “baseless, mere supposition and without foundation”.

“Unless it were radically altered, the proposed draft anti-terror law would make the current situation even worse, as it would entrench and make legal the very worst practices we have documented,” said Philip Luther.

“The Saudi Arabian government absolutely has a responsibility to protect the public from violent attacks, but that has to be done within the boundaries of international law.”