

URGENT ACTION

SAUDI WOMAN IMPRISONED FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS TWEETS

On 16 November 2022, Saudi authorities arrested 29-year-old Manahel al-Otaibi. She has been forcibly disappeared since November 2023. She was charged with violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law due to her tweets in support of women's rights as well as posting photos of herself at the mall without an abaya (a traditional loose-fitting long-sleeved robe) on Snapchat. Her case has been referred from the Criminal Court in Riyadh to the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), set up to try terrorism-related crimes. The SCC is notorious for carrying out grossly unfair trials and handing out harsh sentences, including the death penalty, for individuals peacefully expressing themselves online. Saudi authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Manahel al-Otaibi and drop the charges against her.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Waleed Mohammed Al Smani
Minister of Justice
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
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Email: minister-office@moj.gov.sa

Your Excellency,

I am alarmed that Saudi authorities have forcibly disappeared Manahel al-Otaibi since November 2023. Manahel has been detained since 16 November 2022 and although her whereabouts is still unknown, she now awaits trial in front of the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) on charges of violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law for tweeting hashtags in support of women's rights and posting photos on Snapchat of herself at the mall wearing "immodest" clothing. Shortly before her family lost contact with her, she told them that she had been beaten violently by a fellow prisoner.

According to court documents reviewed by Amnesty International, Manahel al-Otaibi was charged with "publishing and spreading content that contains committing public sins and inciting individuals and girls in society to renounce religious principles and social values and to violate public order and public morals on her Twitter account", in violation of the Anti-Cybercrime Law. The charges against her are based on her social media posts which were "opposed to regulations and laws that relate to women", including through calling to #EndMaleGuardianship. The prosecutor also referred to reports from 2018 and 2019 by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, also known as the religious police, who accused her of tarnishing the reputation of the Kingdom and going to the mall without wearing an abaya, promoting the removal of the hijab and posting photos of that outing on Snapchat.

I urge you to order the immediate and unconditional release of Manahel al-Otaibi, as she is being held solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression. Meanwhile the authorities must reveal her whereabouts to her family. I also call on you to stop using the SCC to systematically silence human rights activism and freedom of expression and to repeal or substantially amend the counterterrorism and anti-cybercrime laws which criminalize peaceful dissent and enact new laws that are fully compatible with international human rights law.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In March 2018, almost five years prior to Manahel al-Otaibi's arrest, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman [stated in a television interview](#) that "women wear decent, respectful clothing, like men ... This, however, does not particularly specify a black abaya or a black head cover. The decision is entirely left for women to decide what type of decent and respectful attire she chooses to wear."

Manahel al-Otaibi's case was first heard by the Criminal Court in Riyadh. On 23 January 2023, the Criminal Court ruled that it had no jurisdiction to try this case and referred the case to the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in the capital, Riyadh. The SCC has routinely used vague provisions under the anti-cybercrime and counter-terror laws equating peaceful expression with "terrorism". Amnesty International has documented how [every stage of the SCC judicial process](#) is tainted by human rights violations.

Both of Manahel al-Otaibi's sisters have also faced charges related to their campaigning for women's rights. In the same case against Manahel submitted by the public prosecution to the Riyadh Criminal Court, the Public Prosecutor accused her sister Fawzia of leading "a propaganda campaign to incite Saudi girls to denounce religious principles and rebel against customs and traditions in the Saudi culture" and using a hashtag "which promotes liberation and the fall of male guardianship". The court document, reviewed by Amnesty International, states that a separate order would be issued for Fawzia's arrest. Their other sister Mariam, a prominent campaigner against male guardianship in the Kingdom, has previously been charged and detained for her women's rights activism and is currently under travel ban.

In a similar case to Manahel al-Otaibi's, on 25 January 2023, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) resentedenced Salma al-Shehab, a Leeds University PhD student and mother of two, to 27 years in prison, followed by a 27-year travel ban upon appeal. The SCC convicted Salma al-Shehab of terrorism-related offences after a grossly unfair trial for publishing tweets in support of women's rights.

As of mid-2021, nearly all human rights defenders, women's rights activists, independent journalists, writers and activists in the country had been arbitrarily detained, put through prolonged and unfair trials – most often by the SCC – or released but under conditions that include travel bans and other arbitrary restrictions to their fundamental rights, such as to conduct peaceful activism.

As of January 2024, Amnesty International has documented the cases of 69 individuals who had been prosecuted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, including human rights defenders, peaceful political activists, journalists, poets and clerics. Of those, 32 were prosecuted for peacefully expressing their opinions on social media. Amnesty International is aware that the real number of such prosecutions is likely much higher.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English and Arabic.
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 6 June 2024.
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Manahel al-Otaibi (She/her).