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UAE: End ‘travesty of justice’ for five convicted over President insults

Amnesty International has urged the United Arab Emirates’ authorities to immediately release five activists following their conviction today by the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi for insulting government officials.

Nasser bin Ghaith, Fahad Salim Dalk, Hassan Ali al-Khamis and Ahmed Abdul Khaleq received two years’ imprisonment for criminal defamation, while Ahmed Mansoor was given three years.

Amnesty International considers the “UAE 5” activists to be prisoners of conscience.

“The defamation charges the UAE5 faced are not internationally recognizable criminal offences and the trial process has been grossly flawed from the outset. The men are imprisoned for nothing but criticizing the UAE President,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director.

“During the trial periods, shadowy figures apparently with links to the government have orchestrated a campaign of vilification against the UAE5 and today’s verdict merely adds insult to injury for these activists, whose names have been dragged through the mud.

“The UAE’s authorities must end this travesty of justice without further delay by ordering the immediate release of these five activists and expunging any ‘criminal record’ as a result of this inexplicable verdict.”

The five men were arrested in April 2011. In June, they were charged under articles 176 and 8 of the UAE’s Penal Code for “publicly insulting” the UAE’s president, vice-president and crown prince in an online political discussion forum which had been blocked by the authorities in 2010.

Amnesty International and other organizations have repeatedly reminded the authorities that there were no grounds for charging the activists and have pointed to grave procedural flaws in their trial, which failed to meet the minimum international standards for a fair trial.

An independent observer who was permitted to attend court sessions in September and October found that the prosecution of the UAE5 for the expression of their views violates international law.

The trial’s irregularities also included detaining the defendants in “preventive custody” for nearly two months before charging them, holding court sessions in secrecy, allowing claims beyond the remit of the court to be heard during the sessions and not granting the defendants any meaningful opportunity to challenge the charges or evidence against them.

The messages allegedly posted by the activists on the banned site criticized government policy and

political leaders, which is protected free speech under international human rights standards.

“It is not a crime to voice criticism or dissent, and Emirati authorities must ensure that the UAE Penal Code protects freedom of expression for all, while prohibiting the threats and intimidation faced by the UAE5 and other activists who dare to speak their mind,” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui.

“The UAE must understand that this flawed and unfair prosecution will tarnish the image of UAE internationally and call into question whether the country is as welcoming and open as it pretends to be.”