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Tunisia: Amnesty International condemns decision to uphold prison sentence against journalist Slim Boukhdir

Amnesty International today condemned the decision of an appeal court in Sfax to uphold the one year prison sentence initially imposed on Slim Boukhdir, a freelance journalist, by a lower court in December 2007 on account of “insulting a public officer during the performance of his duties,” and “breaching public morality” and “refusing to show his identity card” and called for his immediate and unconditional release.

The recent sentence against Slim Boukhdir, which was handed on 18 January, is yet another attempt by the authorities to stifle peaceful criticism and aims to send a chilling signal to independent voices that criticism of the government policies and actions or of President Ben Ali or his family will not be tolerated.

Such prosecutions form part of a wider pattern of repression of dissent which also involves direct censorship of Tunisian and foreign publications, including websites, that criticise the government, and harassment and intimidation of government critics and human rights defenders through heavy surveillance and other methods.

Slim Boukhdir, who remained in detention since his arrest on 26 November 2007, went on hunger strike for several days in December to protest against squalid detention conditions and lack of minimum hygiene.

Amnesty International believes that Slim Boukhdir has been targeted because of his writings critical of the Tunisian authorities and Ben Ali’s family. The organization considers him a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

The organization opposes the use of criminal defamation laws to “chill” expression and the free flow of information and ideas as guaranteed by international human rights law and standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and urges the Tunisian authorities to repeal or amend all laws that permit prison sentences for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

Background

Slim Boukhdir was arrested on 26 November 2007 while on his way from Sfax to Tunis following a summons to collect his passport from Khaznadar, the Tunis suburb in which he resides. He appeared before a judge in Sakiet Ezzit (Sfax) the following day and was prosecuted under Articles 125 and 226*bis* of the Tunisian Penal Code.

His trial in December 2007 was observed by Amnesty International as well as by members of Tunisian human rights organizations and a diplomatic representative from the US embassy in

Tunis. During the hearing the defence lawyers highlighted a series of irregularities in the police and interrogation reports and asked the court to call and to cross-examine other witnesses. However, the judge ignored these requests, in breach of the rights of defence, and sentenced Slim Boukhdir to one year's imprisonment on the first two charges and an additional fine of 5 dinars (approx. US\$ 4) for refusing to show his ID card. Slim Boukhdir was immediately returned to Sfax prison while his lawyers indicated that they would lodge an appeal against his conviction and sentence.

In May 2007, he reported that he had received death threats following an interview he gave to *al-Hiwar* (Dialogue), a London-based TV channel, in which he criticized members of President Ben Ali's family. The week before he received these threats he was the victim of an assault by police officers.

A freelance journalist, he was formerly employed by *Al-Chourouk*, a daily newspaper, but he was dismissed from his job after he used the internet to publish interviews he had conducted with a number of government critics and opponents who launched a hunger strike during the World Summit on Information Society in November 2005. Prior to his arrest in November 2007, Slim Boukhdir went on hunger strike himself for 15 days in protest at official delays in issuing him with a passport.

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