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Saudi Arabia: Human rights activist sentenced to four years' jail following secret trial

The sentencing of a prominent Saudi Arabian human rights activist to four years in jail followed by a five-year travel ban demonstrates a blatant disregard for his fundamental rights, Amnesty International said.

The organization has recently received credible information that on 10 April the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh handed down the sentence to Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady – believed to be currently in the sixth week of a hunger strike – in a secret session.

Amnesty International understands that the Court found him guilty of participating in the establishment of a human rights organization, harming the image of the state through the media, calling on the families of political detainees to protest and hold sit-ins, contesting the independence of the judiciary and having banned books in his possession.

“Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady appears to have been convicted on charges that amount to the criminalization of his rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“After more than a year in detention without being able to see his lawyer, he has been denied any form of justice in a process which flagrantly breaches his rights.”

Amnesty International considers Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady a prisoner of conscience held solely for the peaceful exercise of his rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and is calling for him to be released immediately and unconditionally, as well as for all charges that he is convicted of to be quashed.

According to the information received by Amnesty International, Mohammed al-Bajady refused to recognize the legitimacy of the court or the trial proceedings because his legal representatives were not allowed to attend.

Throughout his detention his legal defence team have been refused access to him and have been told that their right to represent him is not recognized by the Court. They were not let in to hearings despite standing outside the court for hours.

The trial hearing in which he was sentenced was reportedly attended by soldiers in military uniforms, as well as a representative of the governmental Human Rights Commission. However, neither his family nor his legal representatives were made aware of the session.

A co-founder of the unregistered NGO the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), Mohammed al-Bajady has been held since his arrest on 21 March 2011, a day after he attended a protest

in the capital Riyadh by families of detainees arbitrarily held. ACPRA, which was set up in 2009, has campaigned, among other things, on behalf of detainees held without charge or trial.

Mohammed al-Bajady has been on trial since August before the Specialized Criminal Court, which was set up to try terrorism and security-related offences. Amnesty International had previously received reports that he had been on hunger strike since 11 March in protest at his detention and had been refusing to take water since 7 April, giving rise to fears for his health.

An Interior Ministry spokesman told news agencies on 10 April that Mohammed al-Bajady was not on hunger strike and that he was in good health. His legal defence team have asked to be allowed to visit him to check for themselves, but are not believed to have had such access.