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Saudi Arabia: Human rights activists face court as crackdown intensifies

Two prominent activists in Saudi Arabia have been questioned today on as yet unspecified charges as the continuing crackdown on independent human rights work in the country intensifies, said Amnesty International.

The hearing came a day after a special security court raised an additional charge against a prominent human rights activist in a trial that has been ongoing for 20 months.

“The crackdown on freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia is widening with at least a dozen human rights activists sentenced in 2013 alone,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Director.

“It is high time for the authorities to allow people to peacefully voice their opinions and stop punishing activists for their legitimate work.”

Issa al-Hamid and Abdulaziz al-Shubaily from the Saudi Association for Civil and Political Rights (ACPRA) were interrogated today by the General Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution.

Although both activists have previously been questioned, this is the first time that they have been officially summoned for interrogation which raises fears that they will face prosecution for their work as human rights defenders.

A third co-founder of the group, Fowzan al-Harbi, was also informed today that his first trial session at the Specialized Criminal Court will take place on 4 December.

Yesterday, a separate court hearing failed to reach a verdict on the case of Fadhel Maki al-Manasif, founding member of the Adala Center for Human Rights. Instead, the public prosecutor raised new charges against him and the session ended without the court scheduling the next one.

Al-Manasif was detained in October 2011 on charges including “disobeying the ruler by calling for demonstrations and participating in them”, “communicating with foreign media on demonstrations” and “violating the country’s cybercrime law by recording, storing and sharing information”.

The additional charge raised yesterday was based on scribbled notes allegedly found on a tissue in al-Manasif’s pocket. The prosecution argued that the writing on the tissue is proof of his guilt.

He said the paper showed al-Manasif’s “misbehaviour and persistence in calling for disobeying the ruler, disobedience, assaulting the security and stability of the state, inciting division and sectarian strife, and calling for demonstrations.”

“The authorities in Saudi Arabia seem determined to stop independent human rights work in the Kingdom. Instead of engaging with activists about how to institute reforms to improve the human rights situation, they appear to have opted for jailing them on bogus or unjust charges,” said Philip Luther.

In March and June 2013, three of ACPRA’s founding members – Dr Abdullah bin Hamid bin Ali al-Hamid (brother of Issa al-Hamid), Mohammad bin Fahad bin Muflih al-Qahtani, and Dr Abdulkareem Yousef al-Khoder – were sentenced to between eight and 11 years in prison.

Charges included breaking allegiance to and disobeying the ruler, questioning the integrity of officials, seeking to disrupt security, inciting disorder by calling for demonstrations and disseminating false information to foreign groups. Amnesty International considers the three men to be prisoners of conscience.

Abdulaziz al-Hussan, the lawyer of Mohammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid, was forced to leave the country after he was interrogated within hours of writing on Twitter about his clients’ detention conditions.

Abdulkareem al-Khoder’s lawyer, Abdulaziz al-Shubaily, was also called in for interrogation for allegedly insulting a security officer on the day al-Khoder was sentenced.

Individuals associated with other independent human rights organizations have also been interrogated and threatened with prosecution, including members of a newly formed NGO, the Union for Human Rights.

Waleed Abu al-Khair, the head of another independent human rights organization, the Saudi Arabian Monitor for Human Rights, who had been on trial for 19 months and under a travel ban was sentenced to three months in prison by a Jeddah criminal court on 29 October 2013. Days before his sentence, he was informed that he will undergo a trial at the Specialized Criminal Court on almost identical charges. He is currently free pending his appeal.