

URGENT ACTION

RELEASE WOMAN SENTENCED TO 27 YEARS FOR TWEETS

On 25 January 2023, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh, resented Salma al- Shehab, a Leeds University PhD student and mother of two, to 27 years in prison, followed by a 27-year travel ban after the Supreme Court returned her case to the SCC's appeals chamber to look into it again. The SCC convicted Salma al- Shehab of terrorism-related offences after a grossly unfair trial for publishing tweets in support of women's rights. The Saudi authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Salma al-Shehab and quash her conviction and sentence.

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 to learn that the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, resented **Salma al-Shehab**, an academic and mother of two, to 27 years in prison followed by a 27-year travel ban on 25 January, after the Supreme Court returned her case to the SCC's appeals chamber to look into it again. The SCC - once again- convicted Salma of terrorism related offences including "supporting those who seek to disrupt public order, destabilize security and the stability of the state" and publishing tweets that "disturb public order, destabilize the security of society and the stability of the state." These charges arose from the peaceful exercise of her right to freedom of expression through tweets she published on her account in support of women's rights. She has been on a hunger strike since 23 March in protest against her arbitrary detention and unfair trial.*

Salma al-Shehab's trial began on 25 October 2021. According to court documents reviewed by Amnesty International, she was detained in solitary confinement for 285 days before she was brought to trial, in violation of international fair trial standards and Saudi Arabia's own Law on Criminal Procedures. She had no access to legal representation throughout her pre-trial detention, including during interrogations.

In March 2022, the SCC sentenced Salma al-Shehab to six years in prison under the counter-terrorism law. At her appeal trial in August 2022, the prosecution demanded a harsher punishment. The SCC then increased her sentence to 34 years. Salma appealed that judgement again, and in January 2023, the Supreme Court referred her case back to the SCC's appeals chamber to re-examine it. The court dropped the cybercrime charges against her but confirmed other charges under the counter-terrorism law, ultimately sentencing her to 27 years imprisonment.

I urge you to order the immediate and unconditional release of Salma al-Shehab and the quashing of her conviction and sentence as she is being held solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression. I also call on you to stop equating the exercise of freedom of expression with "terrorism", and to repeal or substantially amend the counter-terrorism and anti-cybercrime laws which criminalize peaceful dissent, and enact new laws that are fully compatible with international human rights standards.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Saudi authorities targeted Salma al-Shehab for using Twitter to follow, write about and support women's rights activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul, who was jailed in 2018 after a grossly unfair trial before the SCC for "spying with foreign parties" and "conspiring against the kingdom." She was released in February 2021.

In 2022, Amnesty International [documented](#) the cases of 15 people who were sentenced to prison terms of between ten and 45 years for peaceful online activities, including the longest sentence believed to ever be imposed on a Saudi woman for peaceful online expression. Saudi Arabia also infiltrated at least one social media company to unlawfully obtain information on dissidents and control the information that is disseminated about the Kingdom online. All 15 individuals were prosecuted by the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) which was originally set up to try terrorism cases. The SCC has used vague provisions under the anti-cybercrime and terrorism laws which equate peaceful expression and online activity with "terrorism" to prosecute these individuals. Amnesty International has documented how [every stage of the SCC judicial process](#) is tainted by human rights violations. These individuals were subjected to a range of human rights violations during their detention, including being held incommunicado and in solitary confinement, often for months at a time, and denied access to a lawyer throughout their pre-trial detention. Some of them were also subjected to arbitrary travel bans, in contravention of international human rights law.

The crackdown on online expression is only one tool of the Saudi authorities to repress dissent. As of March 2023, Amnesty has documented the cases of 67 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: 29 May 2023

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Salma al-Shehab (she/ her)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/5961/2022/en/>