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Saudi activists urge release of writer who 'insulted' Islam

AFP (02.01.2013) - Saudi intellectuals on Wednesday urged the kingdom's crown prince to order the release of a liberal writer accused of insulting Islam via his Twitter account.

A petition, signed by around 500 people and addressed to Salman bin Abdul Aziz, called for Turki al-Hamad's "immediate and unconditional release."

"We hope for, demand and expect a quick decision to be made to correct this grave error that has been committed against" Hamad, it said.

It slammed his arrest as "unjust... condemned, reprehensible, shameful, and unacceptable."

Hamad was arrested -- on the orders of Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdel Aziz, who was tipped off by a religious organisation -- for alleged insults to Islam he made on Twitter, his family said on December 24.

The comments he posted had attacked radical Islamists he said were twisting the Prophet Mohammed's "message of love," and what he described as "a neo-Nazism which is on the rise in the Arab world -- Islamic extremism".

The postings provoked fierce debate on social networking sites in Saudi Arabia between his supporters and detractors.

The petition's signatories included Manal al-Sherif and Najla Hariri, two female activists who defied the kingdom's driving ban on women, and liberal columnist Ahmad Adnan.

It called for "a public apology" to Hamad, saying he was targeted by online "incitement" campaigns to try him.

The petition said the interpretation of his comments and subsequent arrest were a "flagrant violation of the Charter of Human Rights and in an explicit assault on an individual's right to free speech."

Online activist Raif Badawi, another Saudi, was arrested in June in Jeddah and accused of apostasy, which carries the death penalty in the Gulf kingdom.

Badawi helped set up a liberal Saudi website, which declared a "day of liberalism" on May 7, calling for protests against the stranglehold of religious officials on public life in the strict Sunni-ruled monarchy.

Amnesty International had condemned Badawi's prosecution.

Saudi Arabia uses capital offence of 'apostasy' to stifle debate

Amnesty (24.12.2012) - A court in Saudi Arabia has decided to proceed with the prosecution of an online activist for apostasy, a charge which carries the death penalty, in what Amnesty International said is a new bid to stifle political and social debate.

On 22 December the General Court in Jeddah had Raif Badawi, 25, sign documents to enable his trial on apostasy charges to go ahead, after his case was passed to it by a District Court on 17 December.

Badawi – who founded "Saudi Arabian Liberals", a website for political and social debate – has been in detention since June 2012 on charges including "setting up a website that undermines general security" and ridiculing Islamic religious figures.

Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.

"Even in Saudi Arabia where state repression is rife, it is beyond the pale to seek the death penalty for an activist whose only 'crime' was to enable social debate online," said Philip Luther, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"Raif Badawi's trial for 'apostasy' is a clear case of intimidation against him and others who seek to engage in open debates about the issues that Saudi Arabians face in their daily lives. He is a prisoner of conscience who must be released immediately and unconditionally."

Badawi's trial began in June 2012 in a Jeddah District Court and was rife with irregularities.

According to his lawyer, the original trial judge was replaced by another judge who had previously advocated that Badawi be punished for apostasy. His lawyer has contested the judge's impartiality in the case.

The charges against Badawi relate to a number of articles, including one he wrote about Valentine's Day – the celebration of which is prohibited in Saudi Arabia.

He was accused of ridiculing Saudi Arabia's Commission on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – also known as the religious police – in the conclusion of his article: "Congratulations to us for the Commission on the Promotion of Virtue for teaching us virtue and for its eagerness to ensure that all members of the Saudi public are among the people of paradise".

The charges against Badawi also mention his failure to remove articles by other people on his website – including one insinuating that the al-Imam Mohamed ibn Saud University had become "a den for terrorists".

"Articles on Badawi's website included references to individuals or institutions that some people might have found offensive, but charging him with criminal offences punishable by imprisonment or execution cannot be justified on any level," said Luther.

"The Saudi Arabian authorities must end their intolerance of people peacefully exercising their legitimate right to freedom of expression."

Hamza Kashgari's poem from prison

Saudi Gazette (21.08.2012) - Hamza Kashgari, the 23-year-old who was detained in February 2012 for allegedly making blasphemous comments on the popular social media website Twitter, has written a poem from prison confirming his apology. The poem was published on the front page of a prominent Arabic daily newspaper, Okaz.

Kashgari was arrested after tweeting a detailed imaginary conversation with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) on his Twitter account, in which he addressed him as an equal. After generating over 30,000 fevered responses and a number of death threats, Kashgari deleted the post and issued a formal apology.

The letter was published by family members and friends in an attempt to allay public anger and hopefully secure Kashgari's release. Many religious scholars and people continue to insist that his apology should not be accepted and that he should be punished for his comments. Others have asked authorities to forgive Kashgari.

During an Arabic TV talk show "Herak" last June, Kashgari's mother called in to say that her son "had said what he said with good intentions but had not expressed himself well." She added that he had repented on the same day before any official statements against him were issued. Sobbing on air, Kashgari's mother went on to beseech King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, to help her son and "to look upon him with mercy and compassion, and to look at my heart."

"I swear no joy has entered my heart these past five months. I hope our father King Abdullah will exonerate my son and release him safely so that he can fast Ramadan with us."

Shahad Ghouth, a 26-year-old graduate student, said that Kashgari should be released since he publicly apologized and admitted his mistake. "They release many prisoners in Ramadan and during Eid Al-Fitr, they should have released him," she said. "His repentance should be enough for him to return to normal life. So many people say that his apology isn't sincere but no one really knows what's inside his heart."

A Hashtag under the name (Hamza's Eid) was created after the apology letter was published on Twitter, with people asking for his release and sending his family prayers and support.

"I can't believe some people are demanding that he be executed," said Maha Ahmad, an Islamic educator who teaches at a local Saudi school. "There are people committing crimes more destructive to society and inhumane. Yet they are not sentenced to death, not even in jail." She continued "where is our humaneness and forgiveness? What message are we giving about Muslims and Islam?"

One Twitter user wrote, "Hamza should be freed now and be allowed to spend Eid with his family."

"There are others who've tweeted and are tweeting more outrageous things," said Mohammad Alghamdi who chose not to disclose his twitter handle.

"But they've not been persecuted with this severity. The same laws and standards should either be applied to everyone or no one. Why is Hamza's case being treated with such extremism?" asked Alghamdi.

Saudi sharia judges decry Westernizing "stench" of legal reforms

Reuters (06.11.2012) - Saudi judges who enforce sharia (Islamic law) have condemned what they see as "the stench of Western ideas" in sweeping legal reforms pushed by King Abdullah, underscoring friction between government modernizers and religious hardliners.

In a letter to Justice Minister Mohammed al-Issa seen by Reuters, eight judges complained about foreign trainers who shave their beards contrary to purist Islam, the minister's meetings with diplomats of "infidel" states and plans to let women practice as lawyers.

The authenticity of the letter, which did not directly criticize either the king or Issa, was confirmed by a source in the Justice Ministry who said it was sent late last month.

Saudi lawyers and political analysts say the judicial reforms announced by King Abdullah in 2007 and supported by Issa are needed to make the legal system more efficient and modern.

"The system deters investors, who find the judiciary opaque. Outdated administrative procedures and inadequate judicial training remain problems," the U.S. embassy said in an assessment in 2009 revealed by WikiLeaks.

Since becoming de facto regent while he was crown prince in 1995, Abdullah has pursued cautious reforms aimed at modernizing Saudi Arabia's economy and making it more socially open, but he has often been blocked by powerful religious conservatives.

The world's top oil exporter has no written legal code or system of precedent, and judges determine cases based on their own interpretation of sharia.

Lawyers say this means similar cases often yield starkly different verdicts and sentences. In some cases King Abdullah has stepped in to annul decisions seen as embarrassing to the country, such as the 2007 jailing of a rape victim on charges of consorting with unrelated men.

However, the reforms have made scant progress five years after being announced, according to lawyers and the ministry source, a delay they blamed on conservatives in the Justice Ministry and within the judiciary.

"I think the majority of judges are in favor. They want to see development both as professionals and for society. But there's another 30 percent. They fight (Issa) day and night, trying to slow down what he is doing," said the ministry source.

Saudi society and government remain very religious and socially conservative. Women are barred from driving, only Islam can be practiced in public and morality police patrol the streets to enforce compliance with social and dress codes.

Saudi officials pressure Christian prisoners to convert to Islam

International Christian Concern (ICC) (07.02.12) - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that earlier today Saudi Arabian officials sent a Muslim preacher to pressure Christian prisoners into converting to Islam. Saudi Arabia arrested 29 Christian women and six Christian men, all Ethiopian citizens, on December 15th after they held a prayer meeting in Jeddah.

"The Muslim preacher vilified Christianity, denigrated the Bible and told us that Islam is the only true religion. The preacher told us to convert to Islam. When the preacher asked us, we didn't deny about our Christian faith. I was so offended with her false teachings that I left the meeting," said one of the female prisoners who spoke to ICC in a telephone interview from Briman jail in Jeddah.

The Muslim preacher stated that she was sent by officials to teach the prisoners about Islam. This is the first time a Muslim preacher has been sent to the prison. The Christian prisoner expressed fear that the teachings would incite the Muslim prisoners held in Briman to harass and even attack the Christians.

"Why don't they release us? We want to go back to our country and worship freely," said the prisoner. Several different media outlets, including the BBC, have reported that the Christian prisoners will be deported back to Ethiopia. However the prisoners themselves reported to ICC today that they are unaware of any such decision and do not know when or if they will be released.

This latest incident comes on the heels of the strip search/body cavity search by Saudi Arabian security officials of the female prisoners on entry to the prison. In a recent interview with the Voice of America, one of the female prisoners stated that Saudi security officials took off the prisoners' underwear and inserted their fingers into the female prisoners' genitals.

ICC's Jonathan Racho said, "We are deeply concerned by the Saudi Arabian officials' recent attempts to pressure the Christians into converting to Islam. We ask that all concerned individuals and groups continue to pressure Saudi Arabia to release the Christians. We urge Saudi Arabia to respect the right of these prisoners to follow the religion of their choice and to immediately release them."
