

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Saudi Arabia: 2013 promises to be a dark year for freedom of expression and of association**

During the first quarter of 2013, the Saudi Arabian authorities have resorted to additional measures to augment those they have previously used to repress freedom of expression and of association. Amnesty International is calling on the Saudi Arabian authorities to end such repressive practices and to allow all individuals in Saudi Arabia to peacefully exercise these rights.

Not content with imprisoning dozens of prominent human rights activists in 2012, the Saudi Arabian authorities have expanded the scope of their repression of peaceful activists by imposing more travel bans for unspecified reasons and durations, by disbanding at least one civil society organization as well as removing its social media accounts, and taking steps towards banning social media applications if these cannot be fully monitored and controlled.

As the Saudi Arabian authorities impose these additional restrictions on freedoms of expression and association, they continue to violate their international human right obligations as well as, in some instances, national law. The violations that have taken place so far in 2013 will only continue unless the authorities comply with their international obligations and respect the human rights of everyone in Saudi Arabia.

#### **Travel bans**

The latest of these repressive measures was a travel ban on Sadek al-Ramadan, one of the co-founders of the Adala Center for Human Rights and its current secretary-general. Sadek al-Ramadan discovered this ban on his way to a family vacation on 29 March 2013, when he was prevented from travelling. The only information he was given was by a customs officer at the airport, who told him that the computer system simply showed that he is banned from travelling. Despite his repeated inquiries to the authorities, Sadek al-Ramadan is yet to find out why he is banned from travelling, on whose authority, and for how long. Some weeks earlier, in January 2013, the authorities prevented Waleed Abu al-Khair, head of Saudi Arabian Human Rights Monitor, from travelling to Sweden to receive the Olof Palme Prize for his human rights activism.

The Saudi Arabian authorities also continue to impose judicial travel bans on peaceful activists and critics to be served after they have completed prison sentences imposed for their legitimate activities. On 9 March, two prominent human rights activists and co-founders of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) - Dr Abdullah bin Hamid bin Ali al-Hamid, 66, and Mohammad bin Fahad bin Muflih al-Qahtani, 47 - were sentenced to 10 and 11 years' imprisonment to be followed by travel bans of equal duration. They were charged with a list of offences including disobeying the ruler, questioning the integrity of officials, calling for demonstrations, disseminating false information to foreign groups, and forming an unlicensed organization. Amnesty International considers both to be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely on account of their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association, including in relation to their human rights activities.

Travel bans such as these violate the right to leave and return to one's own country.

#### **Imprisonment of activists**

Previously, in April 2012, Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady, another co-founder of ACPRA, was sentenced by a special counter-terrorism court to four years' imprisonment followed by a five-year travel ban. He was reportedly convicted of charges relating to involvement in the establishment of an unlicensed 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. In November 2012, Dr Suliaman (or Sulieman) al-Rashudi, an elderly former judge and prominent activist was rearrested, held incommunicado and in solitary confinement until February 2013, and is currently serving 15 years in prison. His colleague Saud al-Hashimi is serving a 30-year prison sentence and has been continuously denied permission to visit his sick mother.

The two latter men, who also face travel bans after their release equal to the length of their prison terms, are two of six activists who remain in prison from the initial group of 16 who were sentenced together in late 2011 for their human rights activism. The six have refused to sign pledges agreeing not to repeat their "offences" or engage in public activism that was proposed to some of them as part of a conditional "pardon".

### **Restrictions on freedom of association**

Independent human rights organizations such as the Adala Center, the Saudi Arabian Monitor and ACPRA are not tolerated by the Saudi Arabian authorities. Such organizations are not permitted to operate without a licence, but such licenses are rarely granted and they risk enforced closure by the authorities.

On 9 March, the authorities ordered the complete disbanding of ACPRA and confiscation of its property. Founded in 2009, ACPRA had become one of the most prominent and very few independent human rights organizations in Saudi Arabia. It reported on human rights violations and helped many families of detainees held without charge to bring cases against the Ministry of Interior.

### **Restrictions on online freedom of expression**

In 2012, the reach of repressive measures further extended to the use of the internet and social media networks. The authorities detained and charged with "apostasy" two online activists, Raif Badawi and Hamza Kashgari. Both are currently in prison and facing on-going trials.

In addition to repressive measures against individual activists, the Saudi Arabian authorities have lately resorted to measures including wiping out of the online presence and social media accounts of activists and organizations. The social media accounts of ACPRA were closed on the same day the organization was disbanded. Dozens of men and women demonstrators arrested over the past weeks have also been ordered to cancel their on-line social media accounts and threatened with long prison sentences if they publicly discuss their cases or use the internet to engage in public activism.

However, in 2013, the Saudi Arabian authorities have begun resorting to more proactive measures of preventing online activism, attempting to ensure that all social media applications are fully monitored or to place an outright ban on all encrypted social networking applications such as Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, and Line.

In early March, the Saudi Arabian Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) asked internet service providers to "take all needed steps to achieve security control over communications". In a subsequent "confidential and urgent" letter the CITC requested that all service providers inform the authorities of the progress they have made in monitoring social media applications, and it requested that in the absence of any progress service providers inform the CITC of their technical capacities to completely shut down all such applications.

### **International human rights standards**

Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights everyone has the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their own country, and the rights to freedom of association and freedom of expression. Restrictions on these rights are not permissible unless they are provided by law, for the purpose of protecting certain public interests (national security, public order, public health

or morals) or the rights of others, and, in each case, are demonstrably necessary and proportionate for the achievement of that purpose. The right of all individuals to freedom of association with others includes founding and taking part in organizations.

Moreover, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders stresses that everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and that each state has a responsibility to ensure that everyone under its jurisdiction, individually and in association with others, is able to enjoy all those rights in practice.

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