

URGENT ACTION

AL-AJAMI'S SENTENCE REDUCED TO 15 YEARS

Qatari poet Mohammed al-Ajami, detained since November 2011, has had his sentence of life imprisonment reduced to 15 years' imprisonment, for "offences" that relate to his poems. He appears to be a prisoner of conscience, jailed solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

Poet **Mohammed al-Ajami's** appeal began in January 2013. On 25 February the Court of Appeal in the capital, Doha, reduced his sentence to 15 years' imprisonment. According to media reports the judge did not state in court the reason why the sentence was reduced. Mohammed al-Ajami will be appealing the sentence before the Supreme Court. He is still in solitary confinement in Doha's Central Prison.

Mohammed al-Ajami (also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb) had been arrested by state security on 16 November 2011 in Doha, and charged with "inciting to overthrow the ruling system" and "insulting the Amir". He had presented himself to state security when summoned, and immediately been arrested. He was detained incommunicado for months before he was allowed family visits.

According to activists in the Gulf region the prosecution brought the charges over a 2010 poem in which Mohammed al-Ajami criticized the Amir. However, the activists believe that the real reason for his arrest was his 2011 work "the Jasmine Poem", which he wrote during the wave of protests throughout the Arab world that began in December 2010. The poem criticized Gulf states and read: "we are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite".

His trial, which began in November 2011 at the Criminal Court in Doha, was said to have been marred by irregularities, with the court sessions held in secret. His lawyer was not allowed to attend one of the court sessions and had to provide his defence in writing only. He was sentenced to life in prison on 29 November 2012 by the same court. Some observers were not allowed to enter the court, and Mohammed al-Ajami himself was not present at the sentencing.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Expressing concern that, though his sentence was reduced on 25 February, Mohammed al-Ajami has been imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and therefore appears to be a prisoner of conscience;
- Calling on the Qatari authorities to release Mohammed al-Ajami immediately and unconditionally, if this is indeed the case, and overturn his conviction.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 8 APRIL 2013 TO:

Minister of the Interior
 Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalid Al Thani
 Ministry of the Interior
 PO Box 920
 Doha, State of Qatar
 Fax: +974 4432 2927
 Email: info@moi.gov.qa

Amir of the State of Qatar
 Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani
 PO Box 923
 Doha, State of Qatar
 Fax: +974 4436 1212
Salutation: Your Highness

And copies to:
Attorney General
 Dr Ali bin Fetais Al Marri
 PO Box 705
 Doha, State of Qatar
 Fax: +974 4484 3211
Salutation: Dr Ali bin Fetais Al Marri

Salutation: His Excellency
Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the second update of UA 319/12. Further information: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/mde22/002/2012> and <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/mde22/004/2012>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

See also the press release published by Amnesty International following the sentencing of Mohammed al-Ajami, Qatar: *Outrageous life sentence for 'Jasmine poet'*, 29 November 2011 at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/qatar-outrageous-life-sentence-jasmine-poet-2012-11-29>

On 8 January 2013 the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights also expressed its concerns over the fairness of his trial, including the right to counsel.

Freedom of expression is strictly controlled in Qatar, and the press often exercises self-censorship. The right to freedom of expression is further threatened by the 2004 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism, whose provisions risk criminalizing legitimate activities. The Qatari government acceded to this convention in May 2008.

The rights to freedom of expression and assembly are guaranteed under international human rights law and standards. Where restrictions are imposed they must be for certain specific purposes, which include the protection of the rights and reputation of others; they must be demonstrably necessary and proportionate and must not put in jeopardy the right itself. Public figures of authority should tolerate a greater degree of criticism, not less, than people generally; any laws that provide special protection against criticism for public officials are not consistent with respect for freedom of expression.

Name: Mohammed al-Ajami (also known as Mohammed Ibn al-Dheeb)
Gender m/f: M

Further information on UA: 319/12 Index: MDE 22/004/2013 Issue Date: 25 February 2013