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Saudi Arabia's new Crown Prince: Actions speak louder than words – release prisoners of conscience

Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud should use his new authority as Crown Prince to match his words with actions and demonstrate his commitment to human rights, said Amnesty International. As a first step, he and other Saudi Arabian authorities should release detained human rights defenders and other prisoners of conscience held solely on account of their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

On 21 June, Saudi Arabia's King Salman issued a royal decree unseating his nephew Mohammed bin Naif Al Saud as Crown Prince, and appointing his son, Mohammed bin Salman to this role, making him next in line for the throne.

In an interview with The Economist magazine in January, Mohammed bin Salman [spoke](#) of the Kingdom's values, stating "it is important to us, the participation in decision making; it is important to us to have our freedom of expression; it is important to us to have human rights". But in the intervening six months, the Saudi Arabian authorities have shown no let-up in their repressive onslaught against dissent.

Since 2012 the government has been carrying out a systematic crackdown which has seen virtually all independent human rights activists and other critics silenced, prosecuted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms or forced to flee the country. Human rights defenders have been prosecuted on vague and overly broad charges under the [2014 counter-terror law](#) in connection with their peaceful activities, and sentenced to up to 15 years in prison after grossly unfair trials in front of the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), a notorious tribunal set up to deal with security and terrorism-related offences.

There also appears to have been a worrying increase in [death sentences](#) against political dissidents in Saudi Arabia, including those defending the rights of the Kingdom's minority Shi'a Muslim community, suggesting that the authorities are using [the death penalty](#) to crush dissent and settle political scores. Amongst those sentenced to death are Saudi Arabian nationals found guilty of protest-related offences committed when they were [under the age of 18](#), in violation of international law.

The recent royal decree also saw the King remove Mohammed bin Naif from his role as Minister of the Interior, a position in which he succeeded his father, Naif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, in 2012. The Interior Ministry has been referred to by Saudi Arabian activists as "a state within a state". The excessive power it wields, including over the SCC and through operation of its own detention facilities, has allowed it to function as if it were above the law, with no accountability, and to maintain a cruel stranglehold over the country's critics. Another [decree](#) earlier this month stripped the Ministry of Interior of its powers to investigate and prosecute crimes, renamed the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (BIP) as the Public Prosecution and placed it directly under the authority of the King, as the main prosecutorial body.

Given the Ministry of Interior's record of arresting and overseeing the prosecution of many of the country's independent human rights defenders and critics, this move has been cautiously welcomed by

some activists who have been demanding such a separation of powers for years. However, it is too early to tell whether this change will actually improve respect for human rights in practice.

In light of the government reshuffle and its ongoing efforts to diversify the economy and build a “[strong, thriving, and stable Saudi Arabia](#)” through Vision 2030, Amnesty International calls on Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Saudi Arabian authorities to end the repression of human rights defenders and immediately and unconditionally release and ensure the convictions of all prisoners of conscience are quashed including, **Mohammad al-Qahtani, Abdullah al-Hamid, Fowzan al-Harbi, Abdulkareem al-Khoder, Abdulrahman al-Hamid, Sheikh Suliaman al-Rashudi, Saleh al-Ashwan, Issa al-Nukheifi, Essam Koshak, Raif Badawi, Waleed Abu al-Khair, Alaa Brinji, Issa al-Nukheifi, Mohammed al-Otaibi, Nazeer al-Majed, Ashraf Fayadh, Fadhel al-Manasif, Sheikh Tawfiq al-Amr and Ali Shaaban.**

The organization further calls on the relevant authorities, pending full abolition of the death penalty, to implement a moratorium on executions in Saudi Arabia; stop the use of the death penalty for offences that are not among the “most serious crimes”, generally understood to mean intentional killing; and ensure that it is not used against individuals alleged to have committed offences when they were under the age of 18.

Furthermore, as Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Defence, Mohammed bin Salman has also presided over a military coalition of states carrying out [airstrikes](#) against the Huthi armed group and allied forces in Yemen since March 2015.

Amnesty International has documented the coalition’s apparent disregard for international humanitarian law, which has seen it repeatedly launch indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks and direct attacks on civilian objects throughout Yemen, killing and injuring civilians and destroying or damaging civilian objects such as [hospitals](#), [schools](#), markets and mosques. Despite these well-documented serious violations and abuses in Yemen, including apparent war crimes, there has been [no accountability](#) to date. For two consecutive years efforts at the UN Human Rights Council to establish an independent international inquiry into violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict have been effectively blocked by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states.

Amnesty International repeats its call on the Saudi Arabia-led coalition to take all feasible precautions to spare civilians and civilian objects in Yemen. Moreover, Amnesty International urges the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince and Minister of Defence to support the establishment of an independent international inquiry that will investigate all allegations of violations and abuses of human rights and violations of humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict in a prompt and thorough manner, with the aim of ensuring justice and reparation for victims and their families.