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Morocco/Western Sahara: Release demonstrators accused of criticising the monarchy

In a letter sent today, Amnesty International urged the Moroccan authorities to release immediately and unconditionally seven members of the Moroccan Human Rights Association (Association Marocaine des Droits Humains, AMDH), who were sentenced to severe prison terms for their participation in peaceful demonstrations during which slogans criticising the monarchy were chanted.

The seven men were arrested by the police in Agadir and Ksar El Kebir, following their participation in demonstrations on 1 May 2007 marking International Workers Day. They were tried and found guilty of “undermining the monarchy”, apparently for slogans that were chanted during the demonstrations. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience, held solely for their participation in peaceful demonstrations during which opinions were expressed peacefully.

Amnesty International is further alarmed at reports that the trials of the seven men were not in line with international standards for fair trial. Some of those accused alleged that they were ill-treated during arrests and threatened during interrogations and defence lawyers were reportedly not able to call defence witnesses during the trials.

Amnesty International also expressed concern at the subsequent arrest of a further ten AMDH member on 5 and 6 June in Beni Mellal, following their participation in a peaceful sit-in in solidarity with the seven men. They were also charged with “undermining the monarchy”, apparently on the basis of slogans that were chanted peacefully during the sit-in. They are due to appear in court on Tuesday 12 June. Nine of them were released on bail, while a tenth person, 72 year-old Mohamed Bougrine, was remanded in custody. They might be sentenced to several years’ imprisonment. Amnesty International calls on the Moroccan authorities to drop all charges against those who peacefully exercised their right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

Background

Following demonstrations on 1 May, Mehdi Berbouchi and Abderrahim Karrad were arrested in Agadir, and Thami Khyati, Youssef Reggab, Oussama Ben Messaoud, Ahmed Al Kaateb and Rabii Raïssouni were arrested in Ksar El Kebir. Both groups of men were tried during the month of May and found guilty of “undermining the monarchy” and sentenced to two to three years’ imprisonment and heavy fines.

Sit-ins were organised by civil society activists in several cities of Morocco in solidarity with those convicted. Following a sit-in in Beni Mellal on 5 June, Abdelkbir Rabaaoui, Abass Abbassi, Mohamed Fadel, Abdelaziz Timor, Brahim Ahansal, Smaïn Amrar, Mohamed Bougrine, Abderrahmane Aaji, Mohamed Yousfi and Nabil Cherqui were arrested by police. They were charged with the same criminal offence.

Both sets of demonstrations proceeded peacefully. Slogans which made critical references to the monarchy in the country, such as for instance "*no more taboos, more freedom*", were chanted in a peaceful manner. Several people, including journalists and political activists, have been prosecuted and in some cases sentenced to prison terms in recent years, after peacefully expressing views on the monarchy, still a "taboo" subject in many discussions.

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