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Syria: Pro-reform writer Habib Saleh imprisoned again

Amnesty International condemns the sentencing yesterday of Habib Saleh, aged 61, to three years in prison for having criticized the Syrian government. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully expressing his political views, and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

On 15 March the Damascus Criminal Court found Habib Saleh guilty of “weakening national sentiments” (Article 285 of the Penal Code) and “broadcasting false or exaggerated news which could affect the morale of the country” (Article 286). The charges on which he was convicted related to several articles on domestic political issues which he had written and published on the internet and in which he had criticized policies of the Syrian government and expressed support for a prominent opposition figure, Riad al-Turk. The court dropped other charges against him.

He had been arrested in Tartus, a town on Syria’s western coast, on 7 May 2008 and was held in incommunicado detention for three months before being brought to trial.

Habib Saleh has already been imprisoned twice this decade, from 2001 to 2004 and from 2005 to 2007. Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience on both occasions.

A writer, translator, pro-reform activist and former businessman, Habib Saleh was the founder of the Tartus branch of the National Dialogue Forum, an unauthorized discussion group. He was one of 10 key pro-reform activists detained from September 2001, at the end of the so-called Damascus Spring, a brief period of increased tolerance by the Syrian authorities for freedom of expression. For having published articles on the internet which accused the Syrian government of “corruption”, “tyranny” and a lack of respect for human rights he was convicted, after an unfair trial, of “inciting racial and sectarian strife” and other charges and was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment. For details see Amnesty International’s report *Smothering freedom of expression: “The detention of peaceful critics”* (Index: MDE 24/007/2002), published in June 2002.

Eight months after his release he was re-arrested, in May 2005, and was sentenced in August that year, by the military court in Homs, to three years’ imprisonment for “weakening nationalist sentiments” and “spreading false news”. The charges again

related to articles critical of the Syrian authorities that he had published on the internet. He was released in September 2007. For further details see Amnesty International's Urgent Action 156/05 (Index: MDE 24/039/2005) of 7 June 2005.

Background

Freedom of expression in Syria is tightly controlled by the authorities. Individuals who express dissenting views run a high risk of being arrested by the security forces, which have sweeping powers of arrest and detention. The criminal, military and state security courts interpret widely loosely defined articles of the Penal Code and frequently hand down severe prison terms to suspected opponents of the state.