

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT

27 March 2024 MDE 23/7886/2024

NEW ASSAULT ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, THOUGHT AND BELIEF AS SAUDI AUTHORITIES PUT FOOTBALL FANS ON TRIAL FOR CHANTS

We, the undersigned organisations, condemn the arrest and prosecution of supporters of Al Safa Football Club (Al Safa FC) under Saudi Arabia's notorious Anti-Cybercrime Law for chants at a recent match, which the authorities deemed "sectarian". This act of repression – curtailing the right to free speech in football stadiums, at a time when the authorities are investing heavily to promote sport and tourism – highlights the appalling discrepancy between the actions of the Saudi authorities and its official narrative of liberalisation.

Twelve members of the Al Safa FC's supporters association are scheduled to appear before the Criminal Court in the city of Dammam on 28 March 2024 for charges under the Anti-Cybercrime Law in relation to religious folklore chants during a match on 24 January 2024. The charges include "sending material prejudicial to public order by means of the internet and electronic devices"; "prejudicing public order by kindling a spirit of sectarian fanaticism by passing on sectarian content in public gathering places"; "disturbing national unity"; and "coordinating this action in advance".

These charges relate solely to the chanting of Shia religious folklore songs celebrating the birthday of Imam Ali (cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and deeply revered by Shia Muslims) during the match; the chants contained nothing hostile or insulting to anyone. The Public Prosecution based its accusations on video clips on social media from the match showing the crowd chanting the songs, and the fact that those arrested belonged to a football supporters' group on WhatsApp.

The Public Prosecution is calling for sentences of up to five years in prison and fines of up to three million riyals (\$800,000), confiscation of the defendants' phones, and closure of their phone and social media accounts as articulated in Article 6 of the Anti-Cybercrime Law, in addition to further harsh punishment at the judge's discretion.

In addition to the persecution of the individuals, Al Safa FC, based in Safwa City in the kingdom's Shia-majority Eastern Province, has been harshly punished. On 4 February 2024, the Discipline and Ethics Committee of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation announced disciplinary measures against the FC citing that the fans recited "phrases and chants that violated the provisions of the disciplinary and ethics regulations". The measures included dissolving the club's board of directors and imposing administrative and financial penalties on it. In the following days, several members of Al Safa's supporters association were arrested, and more than 150 were called in for questioning.

The treatment of Al Safa FC's board of directors and supporters association is a blatant violation of international laws that guarantee the rights to free speech, peaceful assembly, and freedom of religion.

Saudi Arabia is investing billions of dollars in the domestic and international sports industry – signing celebrity footballers, buying European clubs, and bidding to host prestigious sporting events as part of an image laundering drive to "improve international perception of the kingdom". Yet behind the prestige and glamour of its image and sports washing campaign lies a harsh reality. Freedom of expression, thought and belief are being suppressed in Saudi Arabia to an unprecedented degree.

The fact that the authorities have chosen to prosecute supporters of a domestic football club by summoning 150 people for questioning and putting 12 of them on trial for chanting peacefully at a game, is further evidence that the Saudi authorities trying to "sportswash" and rehabilitate their image to the world instead of genuinely using the power of sports to "open up" the country for everyone.

Moreover, the authorities' repeated use of the Anti-Cybercrime Law to crackdown on freedom of expression demonstrates how the authorities routinely resort to abusive and vaguely worded legislation, citing tweets and other forms of protected expression and association as threats to national security to legitimize their human rights abuses. The targeting of Al Safa FC's supporters is a further step in the unprecedented campaign of repression that the country has been witnessing in recent years under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and is a blatant violation of freedom of speech, thought and belief.

SIGNATORIES

ALQST for Human Rights

Amnesty International

European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR)

FairSquare

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

MENA Rights Group

Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC)

Newcastle United Fans Against Sportswashing (NUFCFAS)

Young Players Protection in Africa - Mali