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ARTICLE 19

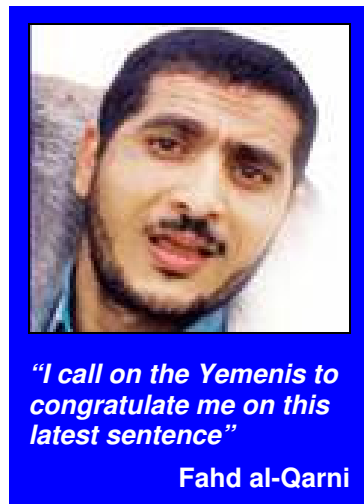
For immediate release – 10 July 2008

Yemen: Freedom of Expression in Peril

ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned by the deteriorating state of free expression in Yemen after a Yemeni court sentenced artist Fahd al-Qarni to 18 months in prison and imposed a fine of YR 500,000 (about US\$2,500). In another development, the verdict in the case of Abdul Kareem Al-Khaiwani was amended, thus prohibiting appeal. Security forces have also harassed activists protesting against this decision.

“The sentence against Mr.al-Qarni, the change in the case of Mr Al-Khaiwani and the manhandling of protestors are all indicators of an alarming trend in Yemen of increasing harassment of journalists and public figures in the opposition,” said Dr. Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

Al-Qarni was sentenced at 6:30am on 9 July, two hours before the start of official working hours, to 18 months in prison and a fine of 500,000 Yemeni Riyals to be paid to the General People’s Congress and the Culture Office in Ta’az. According to a local journalist, al-Qarni called on Yemenis to congratulate him for this sentence. Supporters present in the vicinity of the court were also allegedly harassed.



Al-Qarni was arrested in April this year by the security agents as he was heading to Aden to participate in a festival. The arrest is perceived to be politically motivated and in response to Al-Qarni’s position against corruption in Yemen. In July 2006, members of the Criminal Investigations Bureau arrested shopkeepers in an effort to prohibit the circulation of a cassette by the popular artist. The cassette combines traditional folk compositions with humour and criticism of the government’s policies.

On a different front, the verdict in the case of Mr. Al-Khaiwani was suddenly amended earlier this week to include the phrase “expedited implementation”, which according to local reports prohibits appeal and release pending appeal. ARTICLE 19 joins the Sisters’ Arab Forum, the Dialogue Forum, the Change Organisation for Human Rights, the Media Women Forum, and the Democratic Social Forum in their appeal to Mr. Esam al-Samawi, the chairman of the High Judiciary Council, for clarification regarding the change in verdict.

ARTICLE 19 also condemns the harassment of protestors and activists demonstrating peacefully outside the Supreme Court and later the headquarters of the Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate. Cameras were seized from protestors and Al-Jazeera was allegedly barred from covering the protest.

Abdel Karim Al-Khaiwani has been regularly targeted by the authorities and was arrested and charged in 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2008. ARTICLE 19 has recently expressed deep concern over the sentence of Al-Khaiwani in what is believed to be a politically motivated ruling. On 9 June, Mr. Al-Khaiwani was sentenced to six years imprisonment for alleged ties with the "Houthi" rebels fighting government forces in in Sa'ada province, North West of the country. Mr Al-Khaiwani is an outspoken critic of the government.

ARTICLE 19 urges the Yemeni government to reaffirm its commitment to the protection of human rights. This commitment was set out clearly in the National Reform Agenda, adopted by the government in 2006. Yemen has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and is therefore obliged as a matter of international law to respect the right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by Article 19 of the ICCPR. Yemen has also acceded to the Arab Charter on Human Rights which, under Article 32, guarantees the right to information and free expression.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information: please contact Sarah Richani, MENA Programme Officer; sarah@article19.org, Tel: +44-207-278-9292
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.