

URGENT ACTION

POET MOHAMMED AL-AJAMI PARDONED, RELEASED

Qatari poet Mohammed al-Ajami, a prisoner of conscience, was released on 15 March when the Emir of Qatar pardoned him unconditionally.

Qatari poet **Mohammed al-Ajami**, also known as Ibn al-Dheeb, was released from the Central Prison, south-west of the capital, Doha, on 15 March at about 7.30 pm, after the Emir of Qatar granted him an unconditional pardon. His lawyer spoke to him after his release, and Mohammed al-Ajami asked him to express his thanks to all the organizations who had campaigned on his behalf.

Mohammed al-Ajami had been in Egypt, studying Arabic Literature at Cairo University, when on 24 August 2010 he recited a poem ("The Cairo Poem") in his apartment to a group of about seven people, of whom he knew only about three. He recited the poem in response to a poem another member of the group had just recited. It was recorded and uploaded to YouTube by one of the seven and was circulated widely online.

The poet was arrested on 16 November 2011 by State Security agents on his return from Cairo. He was held incommunicado for three months before he was allowed visits from his family and lawyer. Throughout the pre-trial investigations and despite petitions to the judge about how he was being treated, he was held in solitary confinement in a cell so small that he could not lie down without pressing against the lavatory. During this time in solitary confinement, interrogators forced him to sign a document later used to secure his conviction, which said that he had recited the poem in a public place.

His trial before the Criminal Court in Doha began on 26 March 2012 on charges of "publicly inciting to overthrow the ruling system", "publicly challenging the authority of the Emir" and "publicly slandering the person of the Crown Prince" (taken together, sometimes termed "insulting the Emir") by composing the Cairo Poem and reciting it at public gatherings. The trial was held in secret without any explanation and despite his lawyer's objections. In violation of the principle of the independence of the judiciary, which requires that officials with judicial functions are completely independent from those responsible for prosecution, the judge presiding over Mohammed al-Ajami's case had also conducted the pre-trial investigation. The presiding judge rejected objections about this and prevented the poet from being represented by his own lawyer: the court imposed another lawyer.

Mohammed al-Ajami was sentenced on 29 November 2012 to life imprisonment, which was reduced on appeal to 15 years' imprisonment on 25 February 2013. The Court of Cassation upheld the verdict on 20 October 2013.

Three UN human rights experts issued a joint statement on 20 October 2015, calling for Mohammed al-Ajami to be released and noting that: "The grounds and legal provisions provided by the authorities to justify the arrest and sentence of Mr al-Ajami are contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". They said that penalizing criticism of state figures "is... incompatible with international standards, which protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including in the form of arts, and to take part in cultural life."

No further action is requested from the UA Network. Many thanks to all who sent appeals

This is the fourth update of UA 319/12. Further information: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/016/2013/en/>

Name: Mohammed al-Ajami

Gender m/f: m

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