

Saudi Arabia: Leeds student's 'outrageous' 34-year sentence for Twitter use must be quashed



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Salma al-Shehab targeted for using Twitter in support of women's rights activists such as Loujain al-Hathloul

at notorious Specialised Criminal Court

'The authorities intend to use her to set an example amid their unrelenting crackdown on free speech' - Diana Semaan

Amnesty International has denounced an "outrageous" 34-year prison sentence against a Leeds student jailed solely for her peaceful Twitter activity, calling for her to be immediately and unconditionally released.

Salma al-Shehab, a Leeds University PhD student, was given the sentence at a grossly unfair appeal hearing before Saudi Arabia's notorious Specialised Criminal Court on 9 August having been targeted by the authorities for having used Twitter to follow, write about and support Saudi women's rights activists, including Loujain al-Hathloul.

Al-Hathloul, a high-profile Saudi women's right campaigner, was jailed after a grossly unfair trial at the Specialised Criminal Court for "spying with foreign parties" and "conspiring against the Kingdom". She was conditionally released in 2021 - though remains arbitrarily banned from travelling.

The prosecution in al-Shehab's appeal case cited articles from the country's counter-terrorism law and the heavy sentence marks an alarming escalation in Saudi Arabia's use of this

legislation to criminalise and unduly restrict the right to freedom of expression. The judge in the appeals hearing increased an earlier six-year sentence - handed down against al-Shehab in mid-2022 - while also imposing a 34-year travel ban to be applied from the date of her release.

According to activists with knowledge of the case, al-Shehab was originally arrested in January 2021 by Saudi Arabia's General Directorate of Investigations after she was called in for interrogation a few days before she was due to fly back to the UK to continue her studies. She was held in prolonged solitary confinement for 285 days before she was brought to trial, which violates international standards and Saudi Arabia's Law of Criminal Procedures. She was also denied access to legal representation throughout her pre-trial detention, including during interrogations.

At her appeal trial, the prosecution demanded a harsher punishment. The court sentenced her to 34 years based on the discretion of the judge for "supporting those who seek to disrupt public order, destabilise security and the stability of the state", and for publishing tweets that "disturb public order, destabilise the security of society and the stability of the state". The case against her cited articles 34, 38, 43 and 44 of the country's counter-terrorism law, and article 6 of the anti-cybercrime law.

"It is outrageous that Salma al-Shehab - a PhD student and mother of two from Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority - has been handed down such a cruel and unlawful punishment simply for using Twitter and retweeting activists who support women's rights. "Salma al-Shehab should never have been convicted in the first place, but to have her sentence increased from six to 34 years following an unfair trial shows that the authorities intend to use her to set an example amid their unrelenting crackdown on free speech. "She must be immediately and unconditionally released. The Saudi authorities must allow her to reunite with her family and continue her studies in the UK. "Saudi Arabia must end its relentless crackdown on women's rights activists and any others who dare to speak their mind freely. "Women like Salma must be recognised and protected, not targeted for expressing their opinions. "The authorities

must also stop equating free speech with ‘terrorism’. They should repeal or substantially amend Saudi’s counter-terrorism and anti-cybercrime laws which criminalise dissent, and enact new laws that are fully compatible with international human rights law and standards.”

Amnesty has learned from activists with knowledge of Salma al-Shehab’s case that several other women’s rights activists have been detained in relation to their comments on Twitter since the Leeds student’s detention. However, a prevailing fear of reprisals in Saudi Arabia has deterred people from speaking out about the cases on social media or with journalists.

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