



FREEDOM NOW

Honorary Chair
The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu

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Media Release

Qatari Poet Mohammed al-Ajami Released from Prison

Washington, D.C.: Freedom Now is pleased to announce that yesterday the Government of Qatar released poet Mohammed al-Ajami, after four years of imprisonment. Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani unexpectedly pardoned Mr. al-Ajami after considerable international attention to his case.

“We welcome the release of Mohammed al-Ajami, which unfortunately comes after he spent more than four years in prison for his poetry,” said Freedom Now’s executive director Maran Turner. “We will all be watching Qatar closely, especially as the 2022 World Cup draws nearer. The Government must take steps to ensure the rights of Qatari citizens to openly and peacefully criticize their government.”

Mr. al-Ajami was a student in Cairo, Egypt in August 2010 when he recited a poem to a small group of friends in his apartment. Unbeknownst to him, the recital was recorded and uploaded to YouTube where it was circulated widely and became known as the Cairo Poem. Mr. al-Ajami was arrested in November 2011 when he returned to Qatar. The Qatari government deemed the Cairo Poem and a second poem to be insulting. Authorities charged him with “publicly inciting to overthrow the ruling system” and “publicly challenging the authority of the Emir.”

Mr. al-Ajami’s detention and subsequent trial were replete with violations of international law. Qatari authorities held Mr. al-Ajami incommunicado for three months before he was allowed visits from his family and lawyer. Throughout the pre-trial investigation, he was held in deplorable conditions in solitary confinement in a very small cell. The trial was held in secret and when Mr. al-Ajami’s lawyer objected, he was barred from the courtroom. In November 2012, Mr. al-Ajami was sentenced to life imprisonment, a sentence that was later reduced on appeal to 15 years in October 2013.

Just last month, Freedom Now partnered with Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, Amnesty International, English PEN, PEN International, and Split this Rock to coordinate protests in London and Washington, DC on behalf of Mr. al-Ajami. We delivered petitions with thousands of signatures to the Qatari embassy in Washington, DC calling for Mr. al-Ajami’s release. Freedom Now also coordinated the students of Cornell University, which has a satellite campus in Qatar, to issue an open letter to the university’s acting president about Mr. al-Ajami’s case.

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Our mission is to free prisoners of conscience through focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts.