

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER JAILED FOR ONLINE POSTS

On 9 September, the Casablanca judicial police questioned Rida Benotmane, a member of the Moroccan Association for the defense of human rights (Association Marocaine des Droits Humains) about several social media posts and YouTube videos he released in 2021, in which he denounced the authorities for ignoring demands for social justice and warned against the potential use of Covid-19 vaccine passes in Morocco as a tool of repression. He has since been held in Arjate 1 prison in Salé, a city in northwestern Morocco, on bogus charges that violate his right to freedom of expression. He must be immediately and unconditionally released.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Head of Government of the Kingdom of Morocco

Mr. Aziz Akhannouch
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Your Excellency,

*I am writing to express concern over the arbitrary detention of human rights defender **Rida Benotmane** merely for exercising his right to freedom of expression.*

On 9 September, the National Judicial Police Brigade (BNPJ) in Casablanca interrogated Rida Benotmane over a Facebook post he published on 13 September 2021, which called for a public march against abuses by security forces and two YouTube videos from 2021, in which he criticized the authorities for ignoring people's demands for social justice and warned against the authorities' use of vaccine passes as a tool of repression. The BNJP arrested Rida Benotmane and detained him in Arjate 1 prison, over 30km from where he and his family live in Rabat, the Moroccan capital, where he remains. His appeals hearing has been rescheduled several times and is now due to take place on 31 October 2022.

On 10 September, the King's prosecutor in the Rabat First Instance Court charged Rida Benotmane with "insulting a body regulated by law", "insulting public officials while carrying out their duties", and "broadcasting and distributing false allegations without consent" under articles 265, 263, and 447-2 of the Penal Code respectively. He was also charged with breaching the decree law on the state of health emergency because he criticized the use of the vaccine pass, saying that it could be used by the authorities to restrict freedoms.

Rida Benotmane's detention is emblematic of Morocco's crackdown on critical voices and its recourse to arbitrary detentions to silence peaceful dissent. His detention violates the right to freedom of expression, as guaranteed by both international human rights law and the Moroccan constitution, which states in Chapter 25 that freedom of thought and expression is guaranteed in all its forms.

Considering the above, I urge you to ensure that Rida Benotmane is immediately and unconditionally released, and that all charges against him are dropped. I also urge you to ensure that the prosecution of journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression is brought to an end and all criminal investigations against them are dropped. Finally, I urge you to ensure the amendment or repeal of all laws which punish the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression, including Articles 263 and 265 of the Penal Code.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Rida Benotmane is a member of the Moroccan Association for the defence of human rights (AMDH) and a political activist who was already jailed for four years between 2007 and 2011 for online commentaries.

After he was arrested and detained on 9 September 2022, he went on hunger strike for over 2 weeks in protest of his detention. According to his lawyer, Rida Benotmane is only permitted to call his lawyers and family for a few minutes once per week. He is permitted family visits every 15 days, where they can speak for a maximum of 15 minutes, through a window and surrounded by guards. He is allowed out of his cell only once per day, for a walk of one hour, alone, in a space of 10m².

Moroccan authorities have increasingly targeted dissenting voices in recent months. In April 2022, Saida el Alami, a human rights defender and member of the "Femmes Marocaines Contre la Detention Politique" collective, was sentenced to two years in prison for posting about her ill-treatment by the police and for criticizing the repression of journalists and activists. Her sentence was increased in September 2022 in her appeals trial to three years. Blogger, Rabie al-Ablaq was also sentenced in the same month to four years in prison for offending the King in two videos posted on social media. In August 2022, blogger and social media activist Fatima Karim was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine for Facebook posts in which she made satirical comments about the Qur'an. She has been held in solitary confinement since her arrest on 15 July and is not permitted to associate with fellow prisoners.

The right to freedom of expression, as stated in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Morocco is a state party, includes the right to impart information through any media and regardless of frontiers. The Moroccan Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression in Chapter 25, which states that freedom of thought and expression is guaranteed in all its forms.

On 7 November, a judge in the first instance court of Rabat sentenced arbitrarily detained human rights defender **Rida Benotmane** to three-years in prison and a 20,000MAD (around 1900 EUR) fine for "insulting a body regulated by law", "insulting public officials while carrying out their duties", and "broadcasting and distributing false allegations without consent" under articles 265, 263, and 447-2 of the Penal Code respectively. His lawyer plans to appeal.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Arabic, French, English
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 21 December 2022
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Rida Benotmane (He/him)

ADDITIONAL TARGETS

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