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Algeria: Conviction of journalist is latest escalation in crackdown on media

The Algerian authorities must release all wrongfully detained journalists, drop all politically motivated charges against at least six of them and quash the conviction of journalist Ihsane El Kadi, Amnesty International said today.

The organization called for the release of journalist Ihsane El Kadi, sentenced on 2 April by the Tribunal of Sidi M'hamed in Algiers to five years in prison, of which two years were suspended on unfounded charges related to receiving funds for “political propaganda” and “to harm the security of the state.” Shortly before his arrest on 24 December, Ihsane El Kadi had published an analysis about the next presidential elections in Algeria in 2024 which was critical of the role of the Algerian army.

“Ihsane El Kadi is just the latest journalist to be targeted by the Algerian authorities amid their unrelenting assault on independent media. The authorities are taking extreme steps to stifle critical voices, even though Algeria’s constitution protects the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press,” said Amna Guellali, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“In recent months, a court sentenced an Algerian journalist to death in absentia on espionage charges and at least five others are facing prosecution on unfounded charges, most of which are related to “spreading fake news”. The authorities have also shut down at least three media outlets after being accused of broadcasting online without authorization. All journalists jailed solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression, including those held on farcical charges of spreading ‘fake news’, must be immediately and unconditionally released.”

Plainclothes security officials had arrested El Kadi shortly after midnight on 24 December at his home in Zemmouri, a coastal town 40 km east of Algiers, and later that day led him in handcuffs to the offices of his online media outlets Radio M and Maghreb Emergent. They ordered the staff to leave, seized computers and other materials and sealed the doors. The Tribunal of Sidi M’hamed suspended two of the five-year sentence, which was accompanied by a fine of 700 000 Algerian dinars (around 5156 USD).

Targeting of independent journalists

Over the past two years, the Algerian authorities have prosecuted, arrested or detained at least 11 other journalists and media workers.

In one of the most extreme cases, in October 2022, a court in Algiers sentenced journalist Abdou Semmar to death on charges of spying and “spreading false information that might harm the national security or public order”, in relation to his online media outlet *Algérie Part*. The court sentenced Semmar, who lives as a refugee in France, in absentia and without legal representation. After sentencing Semmar, the judge issued an international arrest warrant against him. Semmar, who did not have access to the file, believes the charges stem from an investigation he carried out in 2020 into Sonatrach, the national oil and gas company.



The authorities are taking extreme steps to stifle critical voices, even though Algeria’s constitution protects the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Amna Guellali, Amnesty International

On 7 February 2023, a court in Boumerdes sentenced Farid Herbi, a journalist and founder of online media outlet *Tout sur Boumerdes*, to three years in prison and a fine for “spreading false information that might harm the national security or public order”. Herbi had been critical of the governor’s way of handling development projects in the province of Boumerdes, east of Algeria.

On 8 February, gendarmerie officers detained Mustapha Bendjamaa, editor-in-chief of *Le Provincial*, an independent Algerian newspaper, on charges related to “receiving foreign funds”, for money he got to help the family of a detainee, based on Article 95 bis of the Penal Code and “publishing classified documents” based on Article 38 of the Law on protecting information and administrative documents, which provides for up to ten years in jail. The latter charge stems solely from private conversations on his phone that the authorities confiscated following his arrest, and is related to information he received about a whistle-blower from a private company.

On 4 February, journalist Saad Bouakba was arrested and held in custody for two days. A court in Algiers provisionally released him on 6 February but issued a travel ban against him and ordered him to appear before the court every two weeks. He was arrested after publishing on Facebook criticism of local government projects. In another case, an appeals court in Algiers acquitted Zoheir Abderkane, a journalist and founder of a Facebook page called Alternews, on 16 January. However, the prosecutor appealed the court’s decision, and he still faces up to three years in prison and a fine.

Media outlets shuttered

After shutting down El Kadi’s two media outlets in December 2022, the authorities also launched a civil lawsuit against Interface Médias, the parent company of the two outlets, for “exploiting an audiovisual communication service without authorization”. On 2 April, the Tribunal of Sidi M’hamed ordered the dissolution of the company “Interface Media” and that it pays for damages to the Algerian audiovisual regulatory body a fine of 10 million dinars (around 73 862 USD).

On 15 November 2022, Algeria’s official media agency reported that the authority for the regulation of audiovisual media decided to close the Al Adjawaa TV channel because it “noted violations of professional ethics, related to the disrespect of the specificities of Algerian society and a violation of public morals”. According to media reports, this decision was linked to the channel broadcasting a scene from a movie in which people kissed in their underwear.

“Using spurious laws as a way to silence journalism is completely unacceptable, the media in Algeria should be free to exercise their right to freedom of expression as protected by international law,” added Amna Guellali.

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