

SAUDI ARABIA: 12 more women's rights advocates jailed

Amid international pressure to stop targeting activists, the country cracked down.

By Leah Rodriguez

Global Citizen (05.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2P3nCTn>– Saudi Arabia jailed another group of women's rights advocates on Thursday.

The advocates and writers weren't politically active, but they had opposed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's regime and expressed public support for reforming gendered laws, according to the Associated Press. The 12 people arrested – 11 men and one woman – reportedly have loose connections with a group of activists who were arrested in 2018 for campaigning to end the country's ban on women driving and its male guardianship system.

Most of the activists were arrested in the country's capital city, Riyadh, on Thursday, though one was taken by authorities in the city of Dammam. Among them are two US-Saudi dual citizens – Badr al-Ibrahim, a writer and physician, and Salah al-Haidar, whose mother is prominent women's rights activist Aziza al-Yousef.

Officials also detained married writers Khadijah al-Harbi, who is pregnant, and Thumar al-Marzouqi, along with writers Mohammed al-Sadiq and Abdullah al-Dehailan, and women's rights activist Fahad Abalkhail.

The latest round of arrests comes a week after the Saudi government temporarily released three jailed women's rights activists. At least 11 other arrested activists still face charges.

The Saudi government imprisoned the activists for being "traitors," alleging that they conspired with international media and human rights groups, and spread "bad morale." The government denies the activists were tortured or harassed, despite accusations of abuse.

The London-based Saudi rights group ALQST told the Associated Press that a small group of people close to the activists has been barred from leaving Saudi Arabia under a travel ban since February.

Human rights organizations Equality Now and Musawah have expressed concern about the recent punishment of women's rights activists across middle eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

"The arrests, imprisonment, and alleged torture of women's rights activists in Iran and Saudi Arabia should be condemned by all Muslim States," Equality Now Global Director Yasmeen Hassan said in a statement released to Global Citizen.

In light of the arrests made on Thursday, Equality Now and Musawah sent a joint letter to 48 Muslim-majority countries, with signatures from 118 women's rights supporters and leaders working in Muslim contexts, asking them to call for the immediate release of detained activists in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Other human rights organizations have also advised the public to join their calls and put international pressure on Saudi Arabia to end its male guardianship system and stop punishing those who speak up for gender equality.

Over the past couple of years, Prince Salman has lifted the country's decades-long ban on women driving and has allowed women to attend sporting events, but those who stand up for these same freedoms have experienced serious consequences.

"We cannot achieve peace, prosperity, and progress without committing to equality for women and girls, and taking active steps to make this a reality," Hassan said.

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