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SAUDI ARABIA: Blogger Raif Badawi released from prison after 10 years

Saudi blogger Raif Badawi released from prison

Badawi's wife, Ensaf Haidar, says she has spoken to Badawi, who had served a 10-year sentence for "insulting Islam".

Al Jazeera (11.03.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3w5mTZw> – The Saudi blogger Raif Badawi has been released from prison in Saudi Arabia after completing a ten-year prison sentence.

Badawi's wife, Ensaf Haidar, who lives in Canada with the couple's three children, announced the news on Twitter, and also said that she had spoken to Badawi via telephone after his release.

A Saudi security official also confirmed that Badawi was no longer in prison, and said that he had been "released today".

Badawi was arrested and imprisoned in Saudi Arabia in 2012 under the country's cybercrime law, after being charged with "insulting Islam" and setting up a liberal online forum.

He had criticised Saudi Arabia's religious police on his blog, a force that has since seen its power clipped in recent years by the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and also called for an end to the role of religion in politics.

A court sentenced Badawi to 10 years in prison in 2014, as well as 1,000 lashes.

During his time in prison the 38-year-old Badawi became a cause celebre for activists calling for human rights reforms in Saudi Arabia, and won a Reporters Without Borders prize for press freedom.

It is unclear what the conditions of Badawi's release are. His sentencing in 2014 also included a 10-year travel ban that would follow the end of his prison term.

“Raif Badawi is still blocked in Saudi Arabia, as he is banned from leaving the country for the next 10 years,” Amnesty International said in a statement. “He is also banned from using any social media for the next 10 years, which gravely limits his ability to express himself.”

“Cruel and inhuman” punishment

Badawi received his first whipping of 50 lashes in January 2015, but the rest were suspended after global condemnation.

The United Nations had described the penalty as “cruel and inhuman”. Saudi Arabia eventually abolished flogging in April 2020.

Badawi suffered health problems during his imprisonment.

Ensaf Haidar, his wife of 20 years, said in 2018 that she and their three children had not seen him for nearly eight years. They are now Canadian citizens.

“I hope one day to live normally with my children and my husband,” Haidar said last week.

“He is an open-minded man, he loves freedom, he likes women to be independent,” she added.

If Badawi is allowed to leave Saudi Arabia, he will be able to live in Canada after legislators voted unanimously to grant him citizenship.

The issue has vexed relations between Saudi Arabia and Canada, which called for the release of jailed activists in 2018. In

retaliation, Riyadh expelled the Canadian ambassador, froze trade with Ottawa and moved Saudi scholarship students to other countries.

But last year, the kingdom started releasing a number of rights activists in response to global pressure, including Loujain al-Hathloul in February 2021 followed by Raif's sister Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sadah last June.

However, the released activists still face restrictions. Al-Hathloul, who had campaigned to legalize driving for women in Saudi Arabia, remains banned from travel and has a three-year suspended sentence.

Many political prisoners remain in Saudi prisons, including the Muslim scholar Salman al-Awdah and the economist Essam al-Zamel.

On Tuesday the United States called on Saudi Arabia to review cases of "prisoners of conscience" and lift travel bans and other restrictions placed on released prisoners, during a United Nations Human Rights Council debate in Geneva.

A Saudi diplomat told the forum that no individuals had been arrested or detained for "exercising the right to freedom of speech or defending human rights" and called the allegations "unfounded".

Photo: Raif Badawi has served a 10-year prison sentence in

Saudi Arabia [File: Stefan Wermuth/Reuters]

Further reading about FORB in Saudi Arabia on HRWF website

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