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Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi, a humanist, is now in hiding outside of Somalia

HRWF (25.06.2020) - On 2 March 2020, Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi informed HRWF about alarming death threats targeting him in Somalia. HRWF and Humanists International helped him relocate to a neighbouring country. As he was also a human rights defender, HRWF successfully applied for a grant on his behalf through [Prisoners of Conscience](#).

Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi was a university lecturer in Somalia until he was arrested on 21 March 2019 for a Facebook post that authorities deemed to be "blasphemy." He was then sentenced on 30 April 2019 to 2 1/2 years in prison.

In the Facebook post that led to his conviction in April 2019, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi commented on the need to take a more proactive approach to recurring droughts in Somalia that have been devastating for individuals and the state as a whole. The current strategy to preventing and combatting these droughts is to pray. This was his Facebook post in response to that:

'The advanced countries make rain but we are still praying to get rain, although despite our prayers we are still suffering every year from drought.

The advanced countries, those we are considering that they are unbelievers and God hates them, live in prosperity even if God hates them. It means that they overcame God by knowledge and using reason.

So, we should learn and base our life on reason and knowledge, not on Myths.'

After spending ten months and seven days in prison, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi received conditional presidential amnesty and was released on 27 January 2020. However, the conditions of his release entailed severe limitations on his freedom.

Threats of violence and death

Professor Ahmed-Hamdi had previously received death threats targeting both him and his wife due to his advocacy for human rights, but now that he has been convicted of blasphemy, he is at risk from both the state and non-state actors.

He had been banned from working as a professor and could not share his thoughts, beliefs or knowledge with anyone in any form; otherwise he risked more jailtime or even the death sentence.

After Professor Ahmed-Hamdi was arrested, an individual sent his wife an email saying: 'once your husband leaves prison I will kill him.'

Furthermore, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi emailed HRWF on 2 March 2020 about another death threat, one that was of particular concern as it had the potential to incite an entire congregation to violence:

'In the Friday [28 February 2020] prayer sermon, a preacher called Adam Sunnah spoke about me and demanded to kill me, as he denounced the prison sentence that I spent because he said that the legal ruling that I deserve is murder.

This preacher was imprisoned several times for terrorism, and he was released from prison only four months ago, as we were together in the same prison, but in two different blocks.

In this sermon he speaks in the first half of it about another Somali writer who is now residing in the West, and in the second section starting from minute 28 he starts talking about me in a very provocative way.'

You can find the recording of this sermon here: <https://youtu.be/vQNRJS37fq8>.

From 2019 until the end of January 2020, HRWF's Database of FoRB Prisoners in the world only contained one humanist in prison in Somalia: Professor Mahmoud Jama AHMED-HAMDI.

HRWF Comment: Prison sentences for humanists and atheists

Atheists suffer a wide range of penalties and discrimination in many countries today.

Egypt, which was ranked 185th out of 196 countries by the Freedom of Thought Report 2019 of *Humanists International*, has been the most dangerous place for humanists, atheists and the non-religious in the world as it is the main country where they have been sentenced to prison terms on blasphemy and contempt of religion charges in the last decade.

However, in 2019 and as of June 2020, no atheist or humanist was in prison in Egypt while there are still a Sunni and a Coptic Orthodox in detention.

In June 2014, an appeal court upheld **a five-year sentence** handed down in absentia to **Karam Saber** for his short story collection entitled "Where is God?". The accusations against Saber included: Insulting the divine, writing short stories which call for atheism, defaming divinity, and inciting strife. In his defense, Saber claimed that: "[In the stories], I expose the fake religious discourse and detect the scale of contradictions in a patriarchal society that claims religiousness while it practices the opposite, especially in terms of oppressing women. I pose simple questions that seek God amid all this absurdity we are living in".

He was said to have violated Article 98 of the Egyptian Penal Code which provides a sentence of six months to five years and a fine of 500 to 1,000 Egyptian pounds [approximately €25 to €50 Euro] for anyone who uses religion to propagate 'extremist ideas' to incite strife, insult a monotheistic religion, or damage national unity.

In 2016, **Mustafa Abdel-Nabi** was charged with blasphemy for postings about atheism on his Facebook page and was ultimately sentenced in absentia to **three years in prison**.

'I feel the danger is increasing around me day by day'

Somali professor formerly jailed for blasphemy facing increasing danger.



Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi

HRWF (13.03.2020) – **On 2 March 2020, Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi informed HRWF about an alarming new death threat from a local preacher during a sermon. Listen to the recording here (from minute 28): <https://youtu.be/vQNRJS37fq8>**

Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi was a university lecturer in Somalia until he was arrested on 21 March 2019 for a Facebook post that authorities deemed to be “blasphemy.” He was then sentenced on 30 April 2019 to 2 1/2 years in prison.

After spending ten months and seven days in prison, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi received conditional presidential amnesty and was released on 27 January 2020. However, the conditions of his release entail severe limitations on his freedom. He cannot disseminate his thoughts, whether in writing or spoken privately or publicly, and he is prohibited from resuming teaching at the university for a period of five years. The authorities justify these extreme restrictions by claiming that he disturbed the public order and could have a negative influence on his students.

Before receiving the conviction of blasphemy, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi had written and spoken about secularism, democracy and human rights. His most recent book, titled *Are you free?*, provides a theoretical framework to argue for the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), freedom of expression, the right to participate in public affairs, women's rights and children's rights.

During his trial, the Public Prosecution mentioned this book and its promotion of a philosophy of human rights. Then, after he was sentenced to jailtime, the Public Prosecution appealed the court's decision and requested the death sentence instead. Luckily this petition was denied.¹

¹ <https://humanists.international/2020/03/protect-mahmoud-the-somali-professor-accused-of-blasphemy-for-a-facebook-post/>

He has published other books and articles discussing the importance of recognising and protecting human dignity and individual freedoms, such as FoRB.

In the Facebook post that led to his conviction in April 2019, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi commented on the need to take a more proactive approach to recurring droughts in Somalia that have been devastating for individuals and the state as a whole. The current strategy to preventing and combatting these droughts is to pray. This was his Facebook post in response to that:

'The advanced countries make rain but we are still praying to get rain, although despite our prayers we are still suffering every year from drought.

The advanced countries, those we are considering that they are unbelievers and God hates them, live in prosperity even if God hates them. It means that they overcame God by knowledge and using reason.

So, we should learn and base our life on reason and knowledge, not on Myths.'

Threats of violence and death

Professor Ahmed-Hamdi had previously received death threats targeting both him and his wife due to his advocacy for human rights, but now that he has been convicted of blasphemy, he is at risk from both the state and non-state actors.

He has been banned from working as a professor and cannot share his thoughts, beliefs or knowledge with anyone in any form; otherwise he risks more jailtime or even the death sentence. This creates a constant state of precarity and grants Somali authorities legitimisation for any future action against him. Considering that before his trial began, "he suffered months of illegal detention, physical harassment, searches and various forms of intimidation,"² this is a serious concern.

Despite the likelihood that the Somali authorities convicted and imprisoned Professor Ahmed-Hamdi on blasphemy charges as a pretext to silence him for his political and human rights activism, he now has a record of blasphemy. This means that he is considered to be anti-Islam by the general public.

A consequence of this is the potential for violence or death by individuals retaliating. In fact, after Professor Ahmed-Hamdi was arrested, an individual sent his wife an email saying: 'once your husband leaves prison I will kill him.'

Furthermore, Professor Ahmed-Hamdi emailed HRWF on 2 March 2020 about another death threat, one that was of particular concern as it had the potential to incite an entire congregation to violence:

'In the Friday [28 February 2020] prayer sermon, a preacher called Adam Sunnah spoke about me and demanded to kill me, as he denounced the prison sentence that I spent because he said that the legal ruling that I deserve is murder.

This preacher was imprisoned several times for terrorism, and he was released from prison only four months ago, as we were together in the same prison, but in two different blocks.

² <https://humanists.international/2020/03/protect-mahmoud-the-somali-professor-accused-of-blasphemy-for-a-facebook-post/>

In this sermon he speaks in the first half of it about another Somali writer who is now residing in the West, and in the second section starting from minute 28 he starts talking about me in a very provocative way.'

You can find the recording of this sermon here: <https://youtu.be/vQNRJS37fq8>.

Professor Ahmed-Hamdi also shared with HRWF that he deactivated his Facebook account and did not leave his house or engage in any socialising after his release. He is now living in hiding. However, he said: 'I feel the danger is increasing around me day by day.'

HRWF calls on the international community to react to the increasingly dangerous situation that Professor Ahmed-Hamdi is in due to his human rights activism and identification as a secular Muslim, and provide him with assistance.

For more information on how to help, email b.hertford@hrwf.org at HRWF, or Professor Ahmed-Hamdi at: abuabdala15@gmail.com.

Conditional presidential amnesty for a Somalian professor jailed for blasphemy

On 29 January 2020, two days after his release, Professor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi called HRWF for help after spending ten months and seven days in prison.



Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi

HRWF (12.02.2020) - On 30 April 2019, **Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi** who is a university lecturer in Hargesia, the capital of the breakaway-region of Somaliland in Somalia, was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison for a Facebook post that authorities called "blasphemy." He had been arrested on 21 March 2019.

In that Facebook post, Ahmed-Hamdi criticized the passive approach to recurring droughts in Somalia, where people pray to God instead of taking proactive steps to resolve them. Ahmed-Hamdi said Somalis should learn from "advanced societies" such as in the United States and Europe and address drought by "making rain."

Somaliland and large parts of Somalia have suffered from repeated droughts in recent years, a phenomenon many have connected to climate change. The droughts have killed millions of livestock in an economy dependent on livestock-exports and have caused millions of people to be displaced due to starvation. The United Nations has called for [1.6 billion dollars in international aid](https://bit.ly/2vkl6Cs) (<https://bit.ly/2vkl6Cs>) to prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths. As of 2017, there were [1.2 million malnourished children](#) in Somalia according to Samaynta News.

Facebook Post

"The advanced countries make rain but we are still praying to get rain, although despite our prayers we are still suffering every year from drought.

The advanced countries, those we are considering that they are unbelievers and God hates them, live in prosperity even if God hates them. It means that they overcame God by knowledge and using reason.

So, we should learn and base our life on reason and knowledge, not on Myths."

Prof. Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi, a secular Muslim

Prof. Ahmed-Hamdi told HRWF:

I am a secular Muslim. It means that I am fighting to keep religion in the private sphere and the state away from the beliefs of its citizens.

I believe in the Quran, but that is irrelevant since no Somali can be a non-Muslim inside Somalia. The religion of an individual becomes important when they can choose it freely.

I fully support freedom of religion and belief, including for atheists.

His story was first published by [Horn Cable TV](https://bit.ly/3boRrIX) on 30 April 2019 (<https://bit.ly/3boRrIX>):

A court in the region of Maroodi Jeex sentenced today (April 30 2019) to two years and six months in prison instructor Mahmoud Jama Ahmed, nicknamed "Hamdi." He was found guilty of the crime of blaspheming the Islamic religion, as was confirmed to Horn Cable Tv by the judge of the Maroodi Jeex court who reached the verdict. The citizen who was found guilty spread these blasphemous writings on social media, particularly Facebook. Mahmoud Jama Ahmed Hamdi taught at one of the universities in Hargiesa. In 2012, he ran as a candidate from the opposition Wadani party in municipal city council elections, although he did not win. Hamdi appealed his prison sentence, as was stated by the judge who gave the verdict. (Hasan Galaydh, Horn Cable reporter, Hargiesa)

Conditional amnesty

On 27 January 2020, Prof. Mahmoud Jama Ahmed-Hamdi received conditional presidential amnesty. This means that he was released from prison, but with severe limitations on his freedom. He cannot disseminate his thoughts, whether in writing or

through public lectures, and he is prohibited from resuming teaching at the university for a period of five years. The authorities justify these restrictions by claiming that he disturbed the public order and so could have a negative influence on his students.

As of today, he still does not dare leave his house. He is concerned about his personal safety because he received death threats from Islamic militants before his arrest. These militants consider him an anti-Islam person, and so he is scared that he will be targeted.

Despite being released from prison, he is currently under house surveillance.

He needs the assistance of all who believe in the right to freedom of religion or belief, including secularists and believers of all faiths.

His email address is: abuabdala15@gmail.com
