



Observers Express Alarm as Women's Rights Activist Salma al-Shehab is Sentenced to a Term of 34 Years in Prison by Saudi Arabian Authorities

Authorities in Saudi Arabia have drawn serious concern over the imprisonment sentence of Salma al-Shehab. The Saudi women's rights activist and PhD student at the University of Leeds in England was detained back in January of last year while on vacation in Saudi Arabia, mere days before she was set to return to the United Kingdom. Particularly alarming is the outrageous "basis" of the sentence and the severity of it, as al-Shehab was given a term of 34 years in prison – the longest ever for a women's rights defender – for social media activism on human rights issues including the retweeting of posts by Saudi dissidents and activists calling for the release of political prisoners in the country. Analysts and observers have pointed to how U.S. President Biden's recent trip to meet with Saudi officials in Riyadh may have empowered Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) to escalate his crackdown on dissent in the Gulf nation. MBS and Saudi authorities continue to engage in this type of behavior while falsely boasting to the world that they are improving the state of human rights, and it is feared that the sense of legitimacy given to officials there could pave the way for more blatant abuses and violations like this.

In the lead-up to President Biden's planned mid-July trip to the Middle East, which included a visit with Saudi officials in Riyadh, human rights activists and Saudi dissidents had warned that it could embolden authorities to intensify their crackdown on freedoms in the country. As it is, government critics are often forced into exile and unlike citizens of other nations, they do not possess the ability to engage in safe and peaceful activism at home. Thus, it was suspected that a Biden trip to meet with Saudi officials may worsen circumstances even further and result in more flagrant human rights violations. President Biden's visit was condemned for breaking a campaign vow to turn Saudi Arabia into an "international pariah" due to its widespread and serious abuses. Critics argued that Biden's course of action would serve to normalize Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and give off the perception that he could, literally, get away with murder. As such, President Biden's infamous fist bump with MBS drew particular ire.

The case of activist Salma al-Shehab is especially troubling because it demonstrates how Saudi authorities have increasingly targeted simple social media usage in their crackdown on any form of what they deem to be dissent. Additionally, the arbitrary nature of the spurious charges means that officials can concoct "criminal" accusations at-will if they perceive a threat to their grip on power. This allows them to label the "charges" in a broad and vague manner, using phrasing like they did against al-Shehab where they claimed that she was "assisting those who seek to cause public unrest and destabilize civil and national security by following their Twitter accounts." These allegations are laughable and would never stand up in a legitimate court of law, but are used by authorities in an attempt to deter dissent and silence criticism – lest an individual end up being subjected to the type of severe imprisonment sentence given to al-Shehab and others.

Human rights activists have voiced unease about the fact that al-Shehab does not appear to be the only victim of a recent dramatic increase in the severity of an imprisonment sentencing. There are credible reports of others who have also faced similar circumstances as al-Shehab, who saw her original sentence of 6 years substantially harshened to 34 years.