

UAE: Free prominent rights defender Ahmed Mansoor, held on speech-related charges

20-April-2017



Authorities in the United Arab Emirates should immediately release **Ahmed Mansoor**, an award-winning human rights defender who is facing charges that violate his right to freedom of expression, dozens of human rights organisations said today, one month after his arrest.

Mansoor, who received the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in 2015, has been in detention since 20 March 2017 facing speech-related charges that include using social media websites to “publish false information that harms national unity.” On 28 March, a group of United Nations (UN) [human rights experts](#) called on the UAE government to release him immediately, describing his arrest as “a direct attack on the legitimate work of human rights defenders in the UAE.”

Informed sources have told rights groups that about a dozen security officers arrested Mansoor at his home in Ajman in the pre-dawn hours of 20 March. They conducted an extensive search and took away all of the family’s mobile phones and laptops, including those belonging to his young children. His family had no information on his whereabouts until authorities issued an [official statement](#) on 29 March, saying he was in detention in the Central Prison in Abu Dhabi.

The signatories understand that Mansoor’s family have been allowed only one short supervised visit with him which took place two weeks after his arrest on 03 April, when authorities moved him from where he was being held, believed to be a detention facility adjacent to Al-Wathba Prison, to a prosecutor’s office in Abu Dhabi. Informed sources told rights groups that Mansoor is being held in solitary confinement and has not spoken to a lawyer.

The UAE's official news agency, WAM, said on 20 March that Mansoor had been arrested on the orders of the Public Prosecution for Cybercrimes and detained pending further investigation. It said that he is accused of using social media websites to: "publish false information and rumors;" "promote [a] sectarian and hate-incited agenda;" and "publish false and misleading information that harm national unity and social harmony and damage the country's reputation." The statement classified these as "cybercrimes," indicating that the charges against him may be based on alleged violations of the UAE's repressive 2012 cybercrime law, which authorities have used to imprison numerous activists and which provides for long prison sentences and severe financial penalties.

In the weeks leading up to his arrest, Mansoor had called for the release of Osama Al-Najjar, who remains in prison, despite having completed a three-year prison sentence on charges related to his peaceful activities on Twitter. Mansoor had also criticised the prosecution of Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith, a prominent academic and economist, who was [sentenced to 10 years in prison](#) on 29 March, for charges that included speech-related offenses, including peaceful criticism of the UAE and Egyptian authorities.

Mansoor had also used his Twitter account to draw attention to human rights violations across the region, including in Egypt and those committed by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. He had also signed a joint letter with other activists in the region calling on leaders at the Arab Summit in Jordan at the end of March to release political prisoners in their countries.

The UN special rapporteurs on human rights defenders, on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression and opinion, and on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, along with the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, said in their 28 March statement that Mansoor's "outstanding work in the protection of human rights and the advancement of democracy, as well as his transparent collaboration with UN mechanisms, is of great value not only for the UAE but for the whole region."

The UN experts said they feared that his arrest "may constitute an act of reprisal for his engagement with UN human rights mechanisms, for the views he expressed on social media, including Twitter, as well as for being an active member of organisations such as the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), and an active supporter of others, including Human Rights Watch."

Mansoor is a member of GCHR's Advisory Board and Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Advisory Committee.

On 29 March, the UAE authorities responded directly to the UN experts' statement, disputing the allegation that Mansoor's detention was arbitrary, and stating that Mansoor "has the freedom to hire a lawyer and that his family has full access to the place of confinement and is allowed to visit him." In 2015, the [UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers](#), who visited the UAE in 2014, expressed concern that lawyers who take up cases related to state security "have been harassed, threatened and had pressure exerted on them," and that "impunity surrounding such breaches of the independence of the legal profession has had a chilling effect on lawyers," making it difficult for defendants in the UAE to secure a lawyer of their choice.

UAE authorities have harassed and persecuted Mansoor for more than six years. In November 2011, the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi sentenced Mansoor to three years in prison for insulting the country's top officials in a trial [marred by serious legal and procedural flaws](#). The UAE president, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, pardoned Mansoor on 28 November, 2011, but authorities never returned his passport, imposing a de facto travel ban. He has also experienced [physical assaults](#), death threats, government surveillance, and a sophisticated spyware attack.

People in the UAE [who speak about human rights abuses](#) are at serious risk of arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and torture, and many are [serving long prison terms](#) or have felt compelled to leave the country. To the knowledge of the signatories, Mansoor was the last remaining human rights defender in the UAE who had been able to criticise the authorities publicly.

The authorities should release Mansoor immediately, since the charges against him relate to his human rights work and his criticism of the authorities, the signatories said. They should give him immediate and regular access to his family and a lawyer of his choosing, and end the harassment of rights defenders and critics of the authorities.

SIGNATORIES

1. ARTICLE 19
2. Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT), Germany
3. Adil Soz - International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech, Kazakhstan
4. Al Marsad, Arab Human Rights Center in Golan Heights
5. Alternative ASEN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)
6. Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
7. Arabic Network for Human Rights Information
8. Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de España
9. Association for Reconstruction, Development & Aid to Qunaytira- ARDAQ, Syria
10. Association Marocaine des Droits Humains (AMDH)
11. Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD)
12. Bahrain Center for Human Rights
13. Banglar Manabdhikar Suraksha Manha (MASUM), India
14. Brazilian Association for Investigative Journalism
15. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
16. Cambodian League for the Promotion & Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
17. Canadian Journalists for Free Expression
18. Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, Philippines
19. Center for Prisoners' Rights, Japan
20. Center for Respect for Liberties and Human Rights in Tunisia (CRLDHT)
21. Centre Action Sociale Réhabilitation et Réadaptation pour les Victimes de la Torture et de la violence (SOHRAM-CASRA)
22. CIVICUS
23. Commission for The Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), Indonesia

24. Day of The Endangered Lawyer Foundation
25. Dutch League for Human Rights, The Netherlands
26. Electronic Frontier Foundation
27. European-Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR)
28. FIDH, under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
29. Finnish League for Human Rights
30. Foro de Periodismo Argentino, Argentina
31. Freedom Forum, Nepal
32. Front Line Defenders
33. Globe International Center, Mongolia
34. Greek Helsinki Monitor, Greece
35. Gulf Centre for Human Rights
36. Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan
37. Human Rights First
38. Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems (HURIDOCS)
39. Human Rights Sentinel
40. Ilam Arab Center for Media Freedom Development and Research
41. Index on Censorship
42. Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, Peru
43. International Association of People's Lawyers Monitoring Committee on Attacks on Lawyers
44. International Centre for Justice and Human Rights (ICJHR), Geneva
45. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
46. International Press Institute
47. International Service for Human Rights
48. Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw)
49. Iraqi Al-Amal Association
50. Khiam rehabilitation center for victims of torture, Lebanon
51. Kuwait Watch
52. Lam Echaml, Tunisia
53. Lao Movement for Human Rights (LMHR)
54. Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada
55. Ligue Algérienne de défense des droits de l'homme (LADDD)
56. Ligue de la Zone Afrique pour la Défense des Droits des Enfants et Elèves, Democratic Republic of Congo
57. Maharat Foundation, Lebanon
58. Martin Ennals Foundation
59. Media Institute of Southern Africa
60. Media Watch, Bangladesh
61. Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (Center Prodh), Mexico
62. Mouvement Anfass Démocratique - Maroc
63. National Union of Somali Journalists
64. Odhikar, Bangladesh

65. Organisation Marocaine des Droits Humains (OMDH)
66. Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA)
67. PEN American Center
68. PEN Canada
69. PEN International
70. People's Watch, India
71. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), Philippines
72. Privacy International
73. Programme Against Custodial Torture & Impunity (PACTI), India
74. Reporters without borders (RSF)
75. Samir Kassir Foundation
76. Scholars at Risk
77. Sisters Arab forum for Human Rights (SAF -Yemen)
78. Social Media Exchange – SMEX
79. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)
80. Syrian Center for Legal Studies and researches
81. Syrians for Truth and Justice
82. Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR)
83. Tunis Center for Press Freedom, Tunisia
84. Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES)
85. Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR)
86. Vigilance for Democracy and the Civic State, Tunisia
87. World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters - AMARC
88. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders